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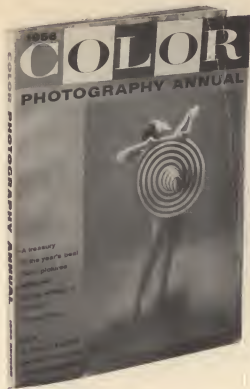
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BY THE EDITOR

The editor of *Amazing Stories* (one moment while we look up his name), Howard Browne, has stepped out of the office for a couple of months—and since we've been sitting around trying to think of an editorial subject anyway, we might as well talk about him while his back is turned.

*Q: Where is Mr. Browne?*

A: He's out in—if you'll pardon the expression—Hollywood: a state of mind located in Southern California.

*Q: Doing what?*

A: Well—ah—Matter of fact, he's writing television scripts.

*Q: Speak up, please. I didn't hear the last two words.*

A: Television scripts.

*Q: What's wrong with that? Television should have more science-fiction stories.*

A: This isn't . . . Well, that's just it. He's not writing science fiction. He's—he's writing Westerns.

*Q: What?*

A: Pardon me, sir, while I wash my mouth out with soap. . . .

*Q: What program is he writing these—these—well, this word you used—for?*

A: Warner Bros. Presents. "The Cheyenne series," I believe it's called. Supposed to be very good, I understand.

*Q: Nonsense. How can any West—any such program be good?*

A: I—I beg your pardon. The word just slipped out.

*Q: Why is he writing these things?*

A: Well, you see, sir, Mr. Browne is something of a writer.

(Concluded on page 130)

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# This Planet is Mine



putting a horrible end to the drama.

A "JOHNNY MAYHEM"  
ADVENTURE

# THIS PLANET IS MINE

By C. H. THAMES

*Almost every civilized world had its role to play in the Johnny Mayhem legend. For Mayhem, not shackled by the necessity of remaining in one body and not hampered by the laws of time which say that a man will live and leave his works behind and grow old in three score years and ten, carried the legend around the galaxy with him. It was largely through the efforts of this one man, alone and probably more truly lonely than man has ever been, misunderstood and often accused of crimes he never committed, that the Galactic League managed to survive the early days of exploration, frontier worlds and conflicting parochial interests.*

*Perhaps the strangest thread of all in the tapestry of*

*They called Johnny Mayhem in and gave him a new body. It hadn't been tried out and no one could guarantee it. This body could easily be the death of Mayhem but he couldn't turn it down because it came with the assignment. He wasn't too worried, though. His only concern was: "What's the trade-in value when I'm through with it?"*

*truth and legend that clings to Mayhem's name is the story of Mayhem's mission on Dreamworld. (See DREAM-WORLD in any good galactic encyclopedia). Late in the Third Millennium of our era, before mental disease was entirely conquered, Dreamworld was a galaxy-wide haven for the psychotic, where they might go and spend their lives, living out the fantasies of their sick minds on a world designed for that purpose. To this world of hallucination and violence went Mayhem, on a mission which might determine the fate of the Galactic League for the next hundred years. . . .*

—from **THE MAN WHO  
SAVED THE UNIVERSE**  
3d edition 3104 AD

"YOU like the body?" Hannibal Wymiss asked.

"It's a body," Johnny Mayhem said, sitting up. There was a mirror on the ceiling of the room and he could see the body there. His new body. The body was naked and seemed young enough and reasonably robust. There were no aches and pains, no signs of disease. Mental disease, yes: but in this case that was absolutely necessary.

"It's a body, the man says!" Hannibal Wymiss chuckled. "Don't you realize the trouble we went to getting it for you, man? Dreamworld isn't like other places; we never expected a visit from Johnny Mayhem, so we don't have a body waiting for you in cold storage. We had to wait until a newcomer to Dreamworld died while being processed, then we rushed word of it to the hub of the galaxy and your soul was sent here to occupy the body."

"Not my soul," Johnny Mayhem corrected. "I don't know anything about a soul. My *elan*."

"Your *elan*, then. Tell me confidentially, Mayhem, what's your mission on Dreamworld all about?"

"You're right," Mayhem said, smiling with the stiff facial muscles of his brand

new body, "it is confidential. So I can't tell you."

"But surely I, director of Dreamworld—" Hannibal Wymiss began.

Just then the door was flung open and an hysterical woman charged into Hannibal Wymiss' office. She did not look at Mayhem at first. Mayhem draped a robe over his nakedness while the woman, middle-aged and distraught-looking, stared at Hannibal Wymiss.

"My son!" she wailed. "What did you do to my son? I got a message—" she paused, crying bitterly, and continued— "he was killed here on Dreamworld, while processing. I thought it was going to do some good. That's what the government medical man said, Mrs. Storey, Dreamworld is just the place for afflicted people like your son. Mrs. Storey, Dreamworld this and Dreamworld that—and so I sent him here. But now my son is dead. Dead, Mr. Wymiss. Maybe you can explain that to me. He never harmed a soul. He just had this paranoia, this delusion of grandeur. . . ." Mrs. Storey looked in Mayhem's direction then. Her face drained white and she took a step toward him. "Ben!" she screamed. "Ben! They told me you were

dead. Ben, it's your mother. Come, Ben. Come home with me this minute. I won't let you stay here another minute."

Alarm on his face, Hannibal Wymiss said, "But my dear Mrs. Storey, legally the insane are quite able to decide that for themselves. Need I remind you that in the case of Burneal vs. Burneal, or Culcross vs. Culcross..."

"I don't care about any Burneal or Culcross. I want my boy. You can't keep my boy here if I want to take him home."

"Ben?" asked Hannibal Wymiss, "do you want to stay here?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Wymiss," said Johnny Mayhem promptly.

"You see, Mrs. Storey? Number T-08-137, Benjamin Storey, has come to Dreamworld of his own free will and wishes to stay here. Legally..."

"I'm going to get a lawyer!" Mrs. Storey cried. "We'll fight this in the courts. My God, Mr. Wymiss, they said Ben was dead. They brought me all the way here from Earth to claim the body. Think how I felt. I'm his mother. I love my boy. My Ben. He never hurt a fly, he's so gentle—except when..."

oh, what's the use talking to you."

"Yes, Mrs. Storey," Wymiss said, "you go along home now. Our lawyer will talk to your lawyer."

"Ben," the woman pleaded. "Come home with me now."

Johnny Mayhem shook his head. "No, ma."

"Benny, you listen when your mother talks."

"No, ma," Mayhem said again. "They told me I was going to like it here, ma. I ain't going back, ma."

Mrs. Storey glared at Wymiss. The director offered her a professionally sympathetic smile and she finally turned, sobbing, and ran from the office. "Phew!" Hannibal Wymiss sighed. He punched a button on his desk and barked: "I want to find out who in Corpse Registration sent a death notice out on a Benjamin Storey, Terra 08-137. Thanks." He looked up at Mayhem. "That was a close one."

"Detain her," Mayhem said.

"Detain her? Who?"

"The woman. Mrs. Storey."

"That poor woman. First they tell her the boy is dead. Then—"

"Boy? This body's around thirty years old."

"Well, her son. Then they

tell her—or she sees for herself—he's still alive. Then, after you're finished on Dreamworld, finished with that body, Mayhem, they'll have to tell her he's dead again. Incidentally, the way you imitated the boy's way of talking was little short of terrific. I remember interviewing him when he came here."

"There's nothing to that. Let the speech centers of the brain take over. He's been dead such a short time." Mayhem added: "Now, get that woman. Confine her or use any pretext you have to. I don't want her leaving Dreamworld until my work is finished. It may be rough on her, Wymiss, but it will be rougher on the galaxy otherwise."

"That big, eh?" Wymiss said. And, when Mayhem offered no answer, leaned over a speaker on the desk and said: "Woman, middle aged, leaving this building around now. Stop her and put her in confinement. I'll contact you."

"Now tell me about Dreamworld," Mayhem said.

"You know, I'm sure—"

"That the mentally unfit come here, if they wish. That their fantasies are actually made real here. That Dreamworld is a chaotic place of impinging fantasies of a couple

of million insane people, chaotic in the whole but orderly and satisfactory for each patient. That they stay as long as they wish. That this usually means for life because they're happy here."

"Well, you have the idea. What do you want to know?"

"About the fantasies, mostly. They're made real. Exactly what does that mean, director?"

"It means what you think it means. They're made real. Vividly, completely real. For example, if you were Don Quijote and you came to Dreamworld with your particular hallucination and if you still thought the windmills were monsters then they *would* be monsters. Monsters that could fight with you and maybe even kill you, literally. You understand?"

"I think so."

"It has to be seen to be appreciated."

"Do your technicians do that? See it?"

"Only from a safe distance, on closed circuit TV. Once you go in there, Mayhem, you're completely on your own. It's one of our laws: we can't go in there. We leave the inhabitants to work out their own problems. Since there's a constant impingement of one dreamworld on another,

since Dreamworld is composed of several million hallucinations, that can be plenty rough. But I don't have to tell you that. You're going to see for yourself. I'm director here, and I never have. In a way I envy you, Mayhem. I—"

Hannibal Wymiss looked at Mayhem's face, the face of Ben Storey. Already the lines of Mayhem's personality were asserting themselves, furrowing the smooth brow, giving a new intensity to the eyes, hardening the mouth. "No," Wymiss said after a while. "I guess I don't envy you at that. God, Mayhem, what a lonely life you must lead!"

Mayhem did not answer. His thoughts drifted back across the lonely gulf of years. How many years? It wasn't important. Years meant little or nothing to Johnny Mayhem, although once they had mattered to him as they did to every other sentient being. But he had not been Johnny Mayhem then. . . .

. . . He had been Johnny Marlow, a promising young career diplomat on Earth. But he'd uncovered something. There was talk of oligarchy replacing Earth's traditional democracy. Some brass hats favored it because their head-

gear would grow larger, others because they approved of the philosophical precepts behind oligarchy, others because a *coup d'etat* would bring them to power. The President of Earth had approved of oligarchy without apparent reason.

He had always been a democrat, Johnny remembered, a champion of the common man, a believer in Earth's traditional republican form of government. Abruptly he changed. He gave no reasons.

He had been possessed.

Johnny had never even learned the alien's name. But somehow he had come to Earth not physically but in sentience. And somehow he had inhabited the mind of the president. This had been the driving force behind the oligarchical movement. Without him, it would collapse. It would have no reason for being. And no one believed Johnny.

He did the only thing he could do under the circumstances. He assassinated the President, hoping to destroy the alien as well. Then he fled to Canopus and Deneb and the great red star Antares, and years would pass before he ever knew whether he had succeeded in killing the alien. Still fleeing, Johnny Marlow

found himself beyond the Sagittarian Swarm, where stellar distances are more nearly planetary and where he thought his grim pursuers might lose him.

They had found him, though, on the planet of a triple-star system. He was wounded mortally but managed to crawl off into the dank jungle where the pre-human inhabitants of the planet, the *Knurr*, found him. There, with science unknown to mankind, with an ancient wisdom which had been lost during the ages, for the *Knurr* were an old people already beyond their flowering when Earthmen still wore rude skins, the *Knurr* saved Johnny's life.

For a long time the galaxy was unaware of this. Johnny's body was found, taken back to Earth, exhibited to the people who had adored their slain President, unaware of what had taken possession of his mind.

And slowly Johnny was healed among the *Knurr*. In a dead man's body. In the early days the knowledge of how he must spend his life—or how he must spend all eternity—almost drove him mad. His sentience, his *elan*, would not grow old. But the electromagnetic makeup of a man's sentience is such that it cannot

occupy a body other than its own for more than an Earth month without destroying the body. Thus Johnny Marlow—Johnny Mayhem, as he came to be called—was barred from all phases of normal human existence.

He could still remember the words of the old *Knurr* doctor there in the steaming jungles of the *Knurr's* native planet. "You must learn to live with this thing which has happened to you, Johnny. You are not as other men. You cannot partake of their social life in any way, and you cannot have family or friends in the true sense of the terms or a place where you belong. You cannot even have a home, for it is written you must always be on the move. Always—and forever, because if you do not die a violent death, you will never die.

"But every month your body must be changed. That is why all the avenues of normal social intercourse are forbidden to you. You will not be one man, but hundreds. You can grow no roots, Johnny. You must always be a wanderer. The alternative is suicide: for, whenever you wish you may forgo the monthly transmigration, and perish."

But Johnny, who was young and full of wonder, slowly con-

quered the horror he had felt. I am not as other men, he had thought years ago in the *Knurr* jungle. Very well. I can minimize my shortcomings—or make the most of them.

He had decided to make the most of them. He contacted the Galactic League and offered his services. No undertaking would be too dangerous, for he did not fear death. In the performance of duty he could commit crimes for which other men might die, for he was not a man in the legal sense. He was a wandering sentience, a nomad soul. If it meant breaking the law on some planet for the good of the galaxy as a whole, he would do it. And he would become legend. He had sensed that, at the very beginning. One man—Johnny Mayhem. Or a hundred men, all the different Johnny Mayhems who appeared in all the trouble-spots of the galaxy.

As the years fled, a system evolved. On every world which shared membership in the Galactic League, a body was waiting for him in cold storage. A dead person, someone who had died in the prime of life. When he came to a particular world on Galactic League business, he used the body. When he left, a new one took its place in cold storage.

But on Dreamworld it was different. On Dreamworld they had never expected Mayhem. There was no body in cold storage, but Mayhem had come. Thus director Hannibal Wymiss had received his orders from the hub of the Galaxy, had acted when a new comer processing at Dreamworld had died. . . .

“. . . all about Dreamworld,” Hannibal Wymiss was saying. “You understand?”

“What?” Mayhem asked, and smiled. “I guess I drifted a bit. There’s one thing that bothers me, though, Mr. Wymiss.”

“I was waiting for you to get to that.”

“As you know, I’ve got to change bodies every thirty days. Otherwise my *elan* dies. But newcomers to Dreamworld are all given amnesia, aren’t they? If I’m given amnesia, I won’t remember who I am. I won’t realize I have to get out of there inside of thirty days—or die.”

Wymiss nodded his big, shaggy-haired head. “I’m aware of that—and can’t do a thing about it.”

“No? Why can’t you waive amnesia in my case?”

“Waive it? You don’t understand. The amnesia is not artificially induced. The amnesia



is a by-product of entrance to Dreamworld. Now Dreamworld, as you know, is the only world in sub-space. Sub-space is fine for interstellar voyages, but its fabric is not the fabric of the normal universe. A world, subjected to the between - dimensions stress. . . ."

Mayhem waved his hand. "I know all that. And nothing can be done?"

"Nothing. You'll change your mind then? You won't go through with it?"

For a few moments Mayhem was silent. He had become reasonably well adjusted to his strange life. It was certainly the most adventurous life that had ever been lived and probably that ever would be lived. The adventure and the diversity compensated for loneliness. He certainly did not want to die. The suicidal impulses of the early years were a thing of the past. Yet if he entered Dreamworld he was signing his own death warrant, for he would forget his identity and, in forgetting, not realize his existence depended on return. . . .

On the other hand, this mission was important. It was vital. The future of the young Galactic League, the only force that could maintain the cohesiveness of an expanding

civilization and keep the spectre of destructive war from the galaxy, might well depend on it. He had no choice. . . .

"I'm going through with it," he said.

Hannibal Wymiss did not look particularly happy about it. "Listen, Mayhem," he said. "I realize I can't tell you what to do. Maybe I shouldn't even try. But look, man! I don't want to be responsible for the death of a legend. Of the Johnny Mayhem legend. And mark it, if you go in there, you're finished. You won't remember being Johnny Mayhem. All you'll know is your name is Ben Storey: you won't even remember anything about Storey's life."

"What about Storey's psychosis?"

Wymiss riffled through a sheaf of papers and began to read to himself. "Paranoia with delusions of grandeur," he told Mayhem. "Fancied himself as Alexander the Great for a while. Later, Adolph Hitler. Still later, Lloyd Hastings. No help there."

"Maybe," Mayhem said. "But we're wasting time. I'm ready, director."

Wymiss shook his head unhappily. "The minute you

leave here you're like any other new Dreamer. No distinctions can be made. No—"

At that moment a buzzer sounded. "Yes?" Hannibal Wymiss said. "Good. I'm glad to hear that." He turned to Mayhem. "They've got the Storey woman. They're holding her."

"See that they do, until I come out."

"Of course. Or—until you die."

"Cheerful, aren't you?" Mayhem said, then smiled. "Well, at least you're telling me the truth as you see it."

"As anyone sees it."

"Remember, Director Wymiss, no one is to know Johnny Mayhem is here at Dreamworld."

They shook hands solemnly, then Mayhem went out through the door marked *Dreamers Only*. Hannibal Wymiss shook his head sadly, went to a wall safe and plunged his thumb in the whorl-reader. The safe-door clicked open and Wymiss withdrew a stand on which was a radio transmitter of strange design. He touched a toggle and said:

"This is Hannibal Wymiss, Director of Dreamworld, Sub-Space, calling the Hub. Hannibal Wymiss, calling the Hub."

His message, beamed

through sub-space, traveled with speed all but instantaneous. "Hub here," the answer came in seconds, crackling through sub-space, which negated a distance of fifty thousand light years. "Is Mayhem there yet, Director?"

"Yes, sir. He's undertaken the mission. But sir, he doesn't have a chance. He—"

"You leave that to Mayhem, Director. Maybe he'll have a surprise or two in store for you. Johnny Mayhem is damn near indestructible, or didn't you know?"

"I know but—"

"Then leave it in his hands. And thanks for your cooperation, Director."

"Maybe . . . maybe I can still stop him. Is it terribly important?"

"Would we have sent Mayhem if it wasn't?"

"I guess not, but is it worth his probable death?"

"Every mission Mayhem goes on is worth that. It's a calculated risk we must take. There's only one Johnny Mayhem, you see. Well, thank you, Wymiss. Keep us informed."

"But if I could have some inkling of what Mayhem came here for. . . ."

"It's top secret, Director. Sorry. Thanks again for your co-operation."

Director Wymiss cut the

connection and returned to his desk. He couldn't get it out of his mind, despite what the people at the Hub had said: he still thought he had sent Johnny Mayhem to his doom.

They said on the ramp waiting to materialize in the sub-space of Dreamworld:

"Crazy? Like hell I am. I know when I need a vacation, is all. . . ."

They also said: "Sure I'm nuts. You think I don't know it? There! You admit it! If I say I'm nuts and think I'm nuts then I'm really not nuts, I'm just neurotic. Let me out of here, I've changed my mind, let me out. . . ."

And they said: "Christopher Columbus, that's who. What do you mean, I couldn't possibly. . . ."

And they said: ". . . after me. Chasing me all the time. Sure, I've got government secrets. Who the hell hasn't these days? They're after me, I tell you. The Denebians. At first I thought it was the Fomalhautians, but obviously anyone knows a Fomalhautian has pink skin, not lavender. . . ."

Misquoting another famous legend above a still more famous legendary portal, the words above the doorway at the end of the great ramp

read, in five-yard-high letters:

ABANDON MEMORY, ALL  
YE WHO ENTER HERE.

Abandon memory. They told you that. They warned you. Will I forget my mission once I'm inside there? Mayhem wondered. It would be ironical if he did. The only weapon in his arsenal was Ben Storey's psychosis. Ben Storey's name and his paranoia (with delusions of grandeur) would go through with him.

I'm Ben Storey, he thought. No. Wait. I'm a secret agent. Yes, a secret agent. Aren't you, Ben old boy? You've been Hitler and Lloyd Hastings and the other dictators long enough, haven't you? You're in a rut. Well, get out of that rut! Be a secret agent. You're a secret agent working for the Galactic League and you're going to Dreamworld after Bellamy Brothers.

Bellamy Brothers, Mayhem thought as he approached the head of the ramp. He must not forget that. The name of his quarry. Bellamy Brothers. Bellamy Brothers. . . .

His name was Bellamy Brothers and he had been chairman of the Council of the Galactic League. Then, suddenly and unexpectedly, he

had had a breakdown, had been adjudged insane. It was then his prerogative to request transportation to Dreamworld, which he had done. He had been here several weeks now, and naturally nothing had been heard about him. It was as if a hole in the galaxy had opened up and swallowed him. The hole was Dreamworld, literally a hole in the fabric of normal space. . . .

Brothers had to be found, they had told Mayhem at the Hub. He was insane, yes—but insanity could be induced by drugs. Someone wanted Bellamy Brothers out of the way. Why? Brothers knew more about the workings of the Galactic League than any other man. Next to the mysterious Johnny Mayhem, Bellamy Brothers was the most important single figure upholding the League.

And, more important, Bellamy Brothers, drugged and insane, could talk. He could talk for a year without stopping for breath and every word he said would be a closely guarded secret of the Galactic League. These words, in the wrong hands, used to spread dissent and the seeds of strife through the galaxy. . . .

The alien, Mayhem thought.

The alien who, years before, had inhabited the mind of the President of Earth. . . .

The alien had survived Mayhem's best efforts to destroy him. Were they going to meet again, here in Dreamworld, after all these years? To Mayhem it seemed a good bet: the unknown alien had somehow got control of Bellamy Brothers' mind, had either drugged him or induced psychosis in some other way, had made him come to Dreamworld.

"Find Bellamy Brothers on Dreamworld," they had told Mayhem at the Hub. "Bring him back outside with you. Bring him to the Hub. If you can't do that, then kill him."

Now the ramp rolled smoothly to the portal and a voice said: "Name?"

"Ben Storey." I'm really a secret agent, he told himself. To hell with dictators. Being a secret agent is more satisfying. I'm a secret agent and I'm looking for Bellamy Brothers. I will have to remember that. Whatever happens, I must take that fact through to sub-space with me.

"You will remain on Dreamworld until you decide to leave of your own free will?"

"Yes," Mayhem said.

"You have not been coerced into coming here?"

"No."

"But of your own free will you have come?"

"Yes."

"And your name is Ben Storey?"

"Yes." I am a secret agent seeking Bellamy Brothers. . . .

"Your psychosis doesn't interest us now, Storey. You must be told, however, what I'm sure you already know. Your psychosis will be one of the creative factors in Dreamworld. Yours and three million others, from all over the Galaxy. It will help mold the world. But the other fantasies, so vividly real in this world of sub-space that, if violent, they can hurt and maim and kill, will impinge on yours. While the world is yours, Storey, it also belongs to three million other people. . . ."

"The world is mine!" Ben Storey cried. It startled Mayhem. It was an automatic response on the part of the dead man who's body he inhabited. For the neuro-synapses of the sentience which had been Ben Storey were preserved. Storey, who had died during processing when he had contracted a rare, incurable disease, was nevertheless preserved for Mayhem's use.

"Yes, this planet is yours,

to do with as you see fit—along with three million others. Remember all those others, Storey. They have their fantasies and their creations, too. These will merge with yours, chaotically. If they are not in harmony—and they rarely are—there is strife. In this strife you can die, and it is real death, not imaginary. And still you're willing?"

"Yes," said Mayhem.

"Observing the behavior of the inmates on closed-circuit TV, the technicians of Dreamworld attempt to understand psychosis and, through understanding, conquer it. That is our payment. That is our only payment. On the other hand, we make no attempt to cure you. The cures, if any, will come for those afflicted after you, when we have learned to control psychosis through what we see here on Dreamworld."

"I understand," said Mayhem.

"Very well. Ben Storey, this planet is yours!"

A moment later, the ramp rolled through the portal. Dazzling lights blinded Mayhem. A great kettledrum rolled an echoing ruffle inside his skull. Hammers beat at his eyeballs.

I'm a secret agent looking for Bellamy Brothers, he told

himself, and was swallowed by an immense blackness erasing all thought.

The wild-looking girl whose name had been Patricia Hurly but had been shortened by herself to Paturly dragged the spaceman inside the cave. It was hard work. It was very hot here on Venus (really Venus? she asked herself, or Dreamworld Venus—it didn't matter). And the spaceman was heavy. Sometimes Paturly wondered where the unconscious spacemen came from. There were no spaceships on (sic) Venus. The spacemen, when they did appear, suddenly materialized unconscious on the ledge outside Paturly's cave. Then Paturly dragged them by the heels inside and waited until they regained consciousness. It was great fun. If they wanted to spend a while with her Paturly magnanimously permitted it. She even allowed them to make love to her. If they did not want this, however, Paturly dispatched them at once to the monsters who dwelled further back inside the cave. She never saw the monsters, but she heard them. They ate very noisily. And, more often than not, they sent something out for Paturly to eat. She never wondered what

it was. But the monsters, at least, were good cooks.

The spaceman groaned as Paturly dragged him heels-first within the cave. She looked down at him. He was a good-looking man, and not old, either. Thirty, she thought. A nice round age. It would be nice if he decided to stay here for a time and be my lover. Some of them do. Usually they're mixed up in the head and haven't quite made up their minds what they want to do on Dreamworld. If they have made up their minds, though, they're more difficult. Then they usually want to get out.

It seemed a shame to Paturly. She was a beautiful girl. She knew that, and knew it wasn't part of her psychosis. She had always been beautiful. At least she thought so. And if you thought you had always been beautiful and had not fashioned yourself in a beautiful image on your arrival, then didn't that make you truly beautiful for all time? She thought it did.

The spaceman groaned again, showing signs of coming to. Paturly groped behind her and lifted a spike-studded mace over her head. If the spaceman was contrary at the outset—and sometimes they were—she'd have no choice

except to clobber him before he could get up and defend himself, then call for the monsters to take him. She always closed her eyes when the monsters came. It was only fair.

"Wow! What a head," the spaceman said, rubbing his temples ruefully. "Where the hell am I?"

"Don't you remember?"

"Yeah, sure. D r e a m - world. . . ."

"Venus!"

"Venus, my foot. Dream-world. Maybe it's Venus to you, lady, but I—"

Paturly lifted the mace threateningly. The spaceman saw it and smiled. "Now I see what they meant. All right. Venus."

"And you'll stay here with me?"

He felt weak. He had barely regained consciousness and he felt completely washed out. Stay here? Hell, yes, he thought, looking around. What was he going to do, climb down cliffsides before he felt strong enough to stand?

"Maybe I'll stay a while," he said.

"Ah!" she breathed, dropping the mace. It clattered on the rock. "And what's your name?"

"Bellamy Brothers," he said promptly.

"You lie!" Up came the

mace again, threateningly. "Bellamy Brothers was already here. I sent him . . . well, I sent him."

"I'm sorry," the spaceman said. "I was wrong. It's coming to me now."

"Then you admit you're not Bellamy Brothers?" Doubt on the beautiful face, but menace too. The mace did not waver.

"Sure. I'm—yes, I'm Ben Storey."

"Ben Storey. That's a nice name. Why did you say Bellamy Brothers?"

"I don't know why," Ben admitted. "Something I should remember about Brothers. Something. But I can't. It's all fuzzy. I'm—I'm a secret agent!"

"You are like hell!" Paturly screamed, very unladylike. "You're a castaway spaceman."

"Well, maybe I'm both."

"All right. Both. Hungry?"

"As a matter of fact, I am."

"Got food. Monsters sent it last time, plenty of it. It doesn't spoil. Want some?"

"What is it?"

"Might be what's left of that no good Bellamy Brothers, for all I know."

The food was brought. Since it was vegetable and not meat, Ben Storey doubted the wild-looking but beautiful woman's

grisly assertion. Vegetable, he thought. Vegetable to me. Maybe it's meat to her. Maybe it is Bellamy Brothers, he thought, gagging. After all, this is Dreamworld.

"Delicious, isn't it? Something like bearsteak, I'd say. Wouldn't you, Ben?"

It tasted like buttered cabbage to Ben Storey. He ate in silence, letting the strength flow back to him.

After a while he got up and walked to the cave entrance. Paturly did not try to stop him, so apparently the cliff was unscalable. But for Ben Storey there was no cliff. There was a formless void, a vague gray swirling abyss. For Ben Storey this was not Venus. It was not anything. The world still had not been formulated by the secret wishes of his mind.

He went back to Paturly and she said tremulously: "Do you love me? I want for you to love me."

She was offering herself up. He thought: a votive offering to my concept of this world. It would be so easy to accept, to join her in this world of her own creation, to negate the need for my own creation. But this planet isn't hers alone; it's also mine, to fashion into whatever form I wish.

Paturly came against him

with a little sigh, her arms entwining behind him, gripping him close. "My love!" she crooned. "My love from space!"

Gently he disengaged her. She stood there, glaring at him. He watched her warily: if she made a move for the mace, he would beat her to it. "Try to understand," he said. "I'm a secret agent. I came here looking for Bellamy Brothers. As much as I'd like to tarry with you," he went on, telling a white lie, "I can't. I must find Bellamy Brothers."

"You mean," she said, disappointed, "you're—not like the rest of us? You're not—well, crazy? You just came here on this mission?"

It was an interesting idea. The more he thought of it, the more he liked it. He would create his own personal world as if he had come here on a mission. It had interesting possibilities and perhaps in time he would even forget that the girl had given him the idea.

"Well, yes," he said. "But you won't tell anyone?"

"I don't believe you. No one comes to Dreamworld like that. They wouldn't have let you in."

"I took a drug," he told her in a confidential tone, playing



it more or less by ear. "A derivative of ACTH. You know what it can do: induce temporary insanity. They were fooled by it and let me in."

Something nagged at the back of his conscious mind. This was a lie, of course: he hadn't taken such a drug, so apparently he did have a psychosis. But he was a secret agent, wasn't he? And he was looking for Bellamy Brothers. Brothers! he thought suddenly. It was Brothers who had taken the drug. He said:

"Bellamy Brothers visited you?"

"Yes. He was the last one. It's so lonely here. Must we talk about him?"

"I'd like to, Paturly. It's my job. Tell me about Bellamy Brothers."

"There isn't much to tell. At first he was confused. At first he made love to me. It lasted several days. It was idyllic. Then—he changed his mind. Wanted to fashion his own world, he said. I delivered him up to the monsters."

"What monsters?"

"The ones in the back of the cave. They'd know about Bellamy Brothers. They're wonderful cooks. They've eaten him."

Ben Storey frowned glumly, then abruptly smiled. "Hold on, there," he said. "Maybe

there are monsters in the back of the cave as far as you're concerned, but—"

"Man-eating monsters."

"Sure. Man-eating monsters. But they aren't monsters for Bellamy Brothers, are they? I mean, we have no way of knowing what Bellamy Brothers decided to create for himself. But if you sent him back there, I can go back after him."

"They'll eat you!"

"In your world. They won't in mine."

Paturly's eyes flashed angrily. "Fool!" she said. "There is but one real world. I have never seen another."

"Because you live like a hermit here. There are others, as many as there are people here on Dreamworld."

Ben began to walk toward the rear of the cave. The cave alone of the Paturly-created world was real to him, perhaps because the cave was such an intimate part of Paturly's creation that it came through stronger than the rest.

"Wait!" Paturly eagerly begged him, running after him and grabbing his arm. "Don't go. We hardly know each other. We hardly—" Her hands dropped away. Her footsteps receded quickly. Go-

ing away—too quickly. Then coming back. Ben whirled. The mace came flashing down. There was an insane look in the woman's eyes. Ben sidestepped and the mace struck the stone floor of the cave. Sparks flew.

"If you won't settle for my world, you won't make one for yourself. I won't let you," Paturly cried.

Ben backed warily toward the rear of the cave. She picked up the mace, which had fallen from her grasp, and came after him. This time as she brought it down in a blurring arc he stepped inside the spike-studded head and grasped the handle, wrenching it from her grasp. She yowled like a disappointed, spoiled child and tried to claw his face with her fingernails. He grabbed her wrist and twisted it only enough to prevent this, then pushed her—not gently—away. Whimpering, she stood against the wall of the cave.

"All right," she said, "all right." The words hissed out explosively between her teeth, angrily, hatefully, but unafraid. "It could have been wonderful for us. I know it could have. But you didn't want that, did you? Oh no, not you. Mr. Smart Alec, a space-man trying to talk himself

into being a secret agent. It could have been wonderful, I know it could have. Well, it's too late now. I wouldn't want you if you came begging. The monsters are going to get you now, Mr. Smart Alec Ben Storey." She cupped her hands over her trembling mouth and called out in a language which Ben had never heard before, a language which most likely was of her own invention. Communication with the monster she had created. . . .

At first there was no answer from the darkness behind Ben. Then he heard a sibilant hissing, as if a den of snakes had suddenly been stirred into life. The back of his neck tingled and he whirled to face the sound.

There was nothing yet. Only the blackness. Bellamy Brothers came this way, he thought wildly. In her world there are monsters back there and the monsters captured and ate Bellamy Brothers. At least she thinks they did. She never actually saw them do it, though. She would have told me. And in Bellamy Brothers' world, maybe it didn't happen that way at all. But if I don't have a world to combat hers—

The hissing became louder. Paturly laughed once. It was a short, abrupt burst of insane laughter. Then Paturly

ran out on the ledge beyond the cave and was silhouetted there for a moment against the gray formlessness before she disappeared into the world Ben could not see.

And the monsters came for him.

With an obscene slithering. Otherwise, silent. She had not told him what they would look like and it was too dark in there to see, anyway. But they were close. Dangerously, desperately close.

You're Ben Storey, he told himself, trying to keep himself from running wildly after the girl and perhaps accepting her Venusian environment like those ancient Greeks had accepted the world of the Lotus Eaters. You're Ben Storey and since you're here on Dreamworld you can fashion your own world. It won't be a place for incredible monsters, either. Not formless, slithering monsters with unknown shapes. Command your world, Ben Storey! It's formless. It's void. You're sort of like a deity, aren't you? Does a deity create his world, impelled by monsters?

Something touched his leg. He yelled and struck with his hand and it retreated, hissing. He was Ben Storey, chief of a staff of secret agents. He was

Ben Storey, agent extraordinary. He wasn't a spaceman. He couldn't possibly be in a cave with monsters.

Something coiled about his calf, crawling quickly and slithering over his knee and along his thigh. He tripped and fell into soft, coiling, undulating slime....

I'm Ben Storey and this is a world I never made!

The monsters which he never saw crawled—

"Crawled, chief?" asked the secretary. "Did you say crawled?"

He was Ben Storey, secret agent. The office was air-conditioned, sound-proofed, furnished adequately but not expensively. He sat behind his desk, leaning back comfortably, while Miss Hurly took dictation. Miss Hurly looked suspiciously like Paturly of the cave, but that didn't matter. His world apparently was the stronger. Her world had been swallowed, at least temporarily by it. Patricia Hurly, his private secretary, was a trim, slender blonde with a gorgeous figure. She smiled politely at him, waiting for him to make the correction.

"What did you say?" he asked.

"You were dictating a memo to the staff about Bel-

lamy Brothers. Then you all of a sudden said crawling. Shall I read it to you?"

"Uh, please do."

"'Memo to staff, from Chief of Section. Congratulations on that last caper, etc., etc. Bla, bla, Bellamy Brothers, bla, bla . . . fleeing with the calculated cleverness of the professional spy. All exits from the city must be watched, all avenues of escape barred, all—' it was at this point, chief, that you paused and said the word crawling. Funny, isn't it?"

"Funny," said Ben, repeating her word. He could still feel the slithering sensation. It made him wince. He told Miss Hurly to finish the memo the standard way, then he got up and walked to the door of his inner office. If, indeed, he was the chief of a staff of secret agents, he wanted to see what his organization was like.

Pat Hurly pouted. "You've hardly noticed me lately, chief."

"That a fact? Busy, I guess."

"Busy, the man says. After what happened in Deneb system, I thought—"

They were so close, he could smell the subtle aroma of her perfume. She closed her eyes expectantly, pouting her lips

at him. He smiled. What the hell, he thought, this is going to be all right. Why not have your cake and eat it? She's young, beautiful . . . if she wants this sort of thing on my terms, fine. Fine.

He kissed her. And opened his eyes.

The walls of the office had grown tenuous. The girl in his arms was no longer wearing a neat, smartly cut business suit. She was wearing skins. Behind the walls of the office, dimly seen but becoming clearer were the walls of a cave.

Paturly hadn't given up, Ben realized with a gasp of surprise. She didn't want to be part of his world any more than he wanted to be part of hers. She would fight it every step of the way, and if she could get him in a weak moment, when he wasn't concentrating. . . .

But that moment was not now. He fought for his world and sensed the office walls growing more solid. He drew away from Pat Hurly and looked at her, sudden contempt in his eyes. It was almost like writing the script for a video play, he told himself. You created it as you went along. You improvised.

"Miss Hurly," he said. "Where are you going?"

"Why, nowhere, chief."

"Your handbag, please. What's in your handbag?"

"Chief!"

"Open it. Show me."

Reluctantly, she brought the handbag around in front of her. "Just the usual things," she said. "You couldn't possibly be interested. Oh, you couldn't possibly."

"No? Open it. Empty the contents on my desk, please."

She stood there, making no move to obey. He took the handbag from her, opened the clasp, turned it upside down. There was the usual feminine stuff, all right, but it wasn't what Ben was looking for. There was a tiny spool of microfilm.

The girl turned away and put her face in her hands. She began to sob. "Do I have to project it?" Ben asked her quietly.

"No. It's—it's the reel of our last staff meeting. I—I've been offered more credits than I could make in a year. But chief, I—I don't know what made me. . . ."

Ben knew what had made her do it, and he felt sympathy for her. It wasn't Pat Hurly's fault. She was merely a part of his world, had been moved in it by him like a puppet, even retroactively. He said

softly, "Let's hear no more about it, Miss Hurly. I won't report you. But of course you realize you must go."

"Yes," she said, her lips trembling.

"Pick up your back pay at the bursar's. You're through here."

Without another word she left his office. She did not even gather the junk which had been in her pocketbook. How to get rid of a character, Ben thought. It made him feel something like a god. But one god among many, a competing deity. For if Paturly's will had been the stronger, he'd be back in her cave right now, caught in the lair of monsters. Ben shook his head, almost in disbelief. There was so much he had to learn about this world, so much to surprise and trick and destroy. But obviously, you could do no more than be on your toes. You couldn't predict what was coming, for you were one creator among millions. At any time another of them might snatch you from the safety of your own world into the chaos of his, and—should his mind prove the stronger—you might never return alive.

The intercom buzzed and Secret Agent Ben Storey flipped a toggle switch. "Storey," he said.

"Carmody, Chief. I've got that Brothers report for you. Want me to bring it in?"

"Right away," Ben said eagerly, and waited. This much of the world he had created, he knew somehow, was not a mere figment of his mind. He *was* looking for a man named Bellamy Brothers, although he didn't know why. It was desperately important that he find Brothers. Far more than his own well-being, far more than Brothers' destiny, depended on it. He didn't know any more than that. Would he know—when finally he caught up with Brothers? In time, he thought. Hell, I only just got here. In time I'll know. A week. A month. A year. What's the difference really?

Vaguely, though, he knew there was a difference. He was not prepared to pinpoint it. He had to hurry, instinctively he knew that. If he did not hurry his mission would fail.

Carmody came in. He was a great bear of a man, six and a half feet tall and two hundred and fifty pounds, but not fat. He was big all over, thick and heavy but not soft. His eyes were small and like twin gimlets. Watch this man, Ben thought. You didn't create him. He's in your world because he's been dragged in or

because he wanted in. And he's powerful.

"Well," Carmody said in his booming voice, "here it is."

Ben took what was given him. It was not a sheaf of papers. Sheaf of papers? Had he really wanted a sheaf of papers? What for? He couldn't remember.

"Some rifle, isn't it?" Carmody was saying. "Hell, these new blasters are all right if you want to slaughter the game, I always say, but if you want to hunt them fair and square use a good twentieth century rifle. Don't you think?"

"Why, yes," Ben found himself agreeing. The rifle was heavy and sleek in his hands.

"Beauty, huh?" Carmody boomed. "Got her from a guy who saved antique weapons. Hell, I got another one almost as good. This baby's a Mannlicher - Schoenauer .30/06. She's got a rubbed walnut stock and is seven hundred years old but believe it or not has been rebuilt and is in perfect shape. Worth upwards of seventeen thousand credits, I'm told. Want to use her?"

"Well, yes," Ben said dreamily. He liked the feel of the rifle in his hands. He wondered what he would be using it on.

"Funny about this Dream-

world place, ain't it though?" Carmody asked. "They give you a lot of baloney about impinging environments, whatever that means, so what happens? You get here and it's exactly what you'd want a world to be—a big-game hunter's paradise, stocked with every variety of big game from a hundred worlds, with no bag limit, no license necessary, shooting going on all year. One big, glorious open season."

"No," Ben said, all but overwhelmed. "There are impinging worlds. I've seen—"

"What the hell are you talking about, Ben old boy? Impinging which? Here we are in our lorry, bumping along an unpaved road in a savannah which makes the best Kenya has to offer look like Central Park, New York, Earth, and you talk about impinging worlds. Isn't that what we always wanted to do—come to this place and hunt? Hell, man, I realize it hasn't been the same for me since I accidentally shot Eloise, but. . . ."

The lorry bounced and clattered along the bumpy road. A green-skinned native of somewhere was driving, humming to himself. Umbrella-topped trees bounced by. Herds of

small game flitted through the shadows. Once the green-skinned driver let out a savage oath and something big lumbered by in front of the open lorry. Mechanically, Ben lifted his Mannlicher rifle to his shoulder, but Carmody slapped at the stock and said:

"Time for that later, Ben. I'm surprised at you. Not from the truck, old friend. Where's your sporting instinct?"

The big man's name was Carmody. A wisp of memory remained in Storey's mind—left over from the outside world. There were other wisps too, but now they weren't important. Apparently the brain is not scraped clean on entering Dreamworld. Carmody. Only Carmody mattered now. Ben remembered an article about a man named Carmody on the videocasts. Huge man, like this one. Fabulously wealthy playboy, with a wife named Eloise. Carmody and Eloise had been hunting. Accidentally, Carmody had slain his wife. He'd broken emotionally. He'd gone psychotic. He'd been sent to Dreamworld. . . .

This was that Carmody. A big man with an overpowering personality and will. Naturally Dreamworld would be a hunter's paradise to him.

And his will was so strong that whoever crossed his path would be swept into that hunter's paradise with him. As Ben had been.

"I'm Ben Storey," Ben said to himself. "I'm a secret agent and I'm back in my office right now."

But he wasn't. He was in a lorry with Carmody, holding a high power antique Mannlicher rifle across his knees.

"What did you say?" Carmody asked. "What the hell did you say?"

"Don't mind me," Ben said. He had a fuzzy memory of something, but it was blotted out.

The lorry lurched to a stop. "See anything, Reemba?" Carmody asked, swinging his big bulk from the open truck and alighting on the road agile as a cat, his own rifle in his hands.

"Pug marks," said Reemba. "Saurians. Look."

Carmody and Ben studied the ground. The tracks were large, incredibly large. They were a dozen yards apart. Whatever had come this way had the bulk of a brontosaur.

"How about that?" Carmody said happily, getting down on his hands and knees near the pug mark. "How about that, Ben? *Wadiq* tracks, just like Reemba said

we'd find them. Good old Reemba."

The green man flashed a smile at them. "Fifteen minute tracks," he said. "*Wadiq* near."

"Ever see a *Wadiq*, Ben?" Carmody asked. "They're native to Capella VII, you know. I hunted there once, saw a *Wadiq* and had a chance at it, but missed. Man, it's like a dream come true!"

"Isn't it?" said Ben, looking around. The country was not flat here. It was anything but flat. It was a series of undulating hills and little vales. It smelled very clean and fresh.

"Track him on foot?" Carmody asked the green man, Reemba.

"Yes. Now."

They left the lorry on the road without another glance at it. The air was clear, cool, magnificent. It was heady, almost like wine.

It was danger.

Instinctively, Ben knew that. Carmody. Why should Carmody, the big-game hunting playboy, have been in his office? He hadn't willed Carmody there, and Carmody certainly didn't need him. As a hunting companion? But why Ben Storey? It had to be more than that. Especially



since from what he had read Carmody had usually preferred to hunt alone. Then was it possible that Carmody was merely an agent for someone else? That hardly seemed possible, for Carmody's will was so strong. Still, it could have seemed strong in comparison with Ben's, and Ben was still so new here on Dreamworld, he hadn't had the chance to truly understand the place and assert himself....

They found their *Wadiq* that afternoon in the cool air and under the strong sun. It was a dinosaur-like creature sixty or seventy feet long and better than fifteen feet high at the shoulder. Incredibly, their Mannlichers were able to stop it. It came crashing down like a great tree and for a long time the tail thrashed independently of the dead body. Carmody finally had to put a bullet through that too, as if the *Wadiq* had a head-brain and a tail-brain, which might easily have been the case. Then, after that, they pounded one another exuberantly on the back and Reemba brought up the lorry over the rough ground and they had drinks and an evening meal and they made their camp there and in the morning hunted fresh game.

They hunted the big game of fifty worlds, all of it here on Dreamworld. They hunted and each day Ben thought less and less of his dimly-remembered mission. Bellamy Brothers? Now who, exactly, was Bellamy Brothers? And what was Ben's urgency, anyway? He had never seen such hunting country. Why not remain here a while longer anyhow? No more than three weeks—or perhaps it was three and a half—had passed. He had all the time in the world, didn't he?

But lately, in the past several days, he had been playing an interesting kind of game. Battle of wills, he called it, although Carmody did not know this. With Reemba's expert tracking, Carmody and Ben would crawl up to some particular variety of big-game animal, Carmody exultant because it was a rare specimen. Then, at the last minute, the animal would change. Ben had made it change, to see if he could do it. At first he would change a single feature or two, like giving a long-legged beast shorter legs or a two-eyed creature a single Cyclopean orb. When this happened Carmody figured they had stumbled on a freak. But gradually Ben took the game

further: Carmody found himself shooting animals which turned out not to be game animals at all. Sometimes he shot at creatures which had never existed before, until Ben had dreamed them up. He did not understand this at all, but he never dreamed that Ben was responsible.

Ben soon tired of the game because it was too easy. But it meant one thing to him: his will was every bit as strong as Carmody's, if not stronger. When the time came for a battle of wills...but why should it come? What did he have against Carmody? What did he have to do that was so urgent? He wished he could remember. He had taken something of his mission here to Dreamworld with him, but his safari with Carmody had blotted it out.

One morning Ben said, "I think I'll be going back, Car."

"Back? What do you mean back?"

"Oh, I don't know. My office. I—once had an office here."

"On Dreamworld? Don't be ridiculous. Dreamworld's one big, gorgeous savannah, that's all. Where could there be an office?"

"Dreamworld's what you make it. I'm going back."

"No, Ben."

"What do you mean, no?"

"I—well, you're a fine hunting partner, that's all. You stay here with me!" Carmody said in a voice that would brook no disagreement.

Ben shook his head. "I'm leaving, I guess," he said mildly.

"Aw, Ben. Just a few more days. Reemba! Some whiskey."

"No whiskey for me," Ben said.

"Hell, three, four more days, Ben. Make it an even month. What's wrong with staying out here a month? Ever see such hunting?"

What's wrong with staying out here a month? Something was wrong with it, Ben knew. But he couldn't remember what.

"I'll clean the Mannlicher and leave it. I'll go the way I came," Ben said.

"Reemba can clean the damn gun. That's what he's here for. But stick around, Ben. Four more days?"

"No," Ben said stubbornly. And it was being stubborn, he thought. The devil of it was, he didn't know why four more days should matter to him so, after spending almost a month out here.

Ben got up and Carmody shook hands with him grump-

ily. Reemba came and they shook hands too. "You're sure about the rifle?" Ben said.

"Don't go."

But Ben took a back-pack of food, a canteen of water and a canteen of whiskey, and started back on the road. They had not gone very far, really. For weeks they had been circling through the good hunting country. It was probably a two or three day trek back to civilization on foot. Trek? Ben thought suddenly. This was Dreamworld, wasn't it? Why did it have to be a trek at all? Why couldn't he merely re-create civilization at this point? But try as he might, he could not do it. Something was stopping him.

He paused for lunch in a little forest glade. He had not remembered the forest on the way out, but it was there now, as if it had been created in the interval for some specific purpose. A cool stream gurgled by, so Ben forgot about his canteen and drank there after eating.

Then he heard something. Working its way through the woods toward him. The forest, he thought. Someone was following him. The forest had been created to give that unknown someone cover. Ben

was instantly wary. He found a little declivity on the side of the stream and hunkered down in it. After a while the faint rustling sound came closer. It became footfalls, very quiet, all but lost in the sound the rushing water made. Had Ben not been hunting for several weeks, his ear grown keen to the little telltale sounds, he never would have heard it.

It was Reemba.

Reemba came stealthily along Ben's trail. When he got to the stream he paused, studying the ground. Every muscle of his body was tense. He knew Ben was close by. He was carrying his skinning knife and Ben knew the green man knew how to use it. Ben was unarmed.

Reemba crossed the stream and went a little ways downstream. Then he shook his head and came back upstream. He went right by Ben's declivity without seeing him. Ben sucked in his breath and stood up and fell on Reemba from the rear.

He pulled Reemba to the ground and they struggled there. Reemba never got out from under to use his knife. Ben got his knife arm up behind him and pulled it toward Reemba's shoulder blade. If he pulled much far-

ther he would break Reemba's arm, and the green man knew it.

"Talk," said Ben. "Why did you come back? To kill me?"

"Yes. Yes. My arm."

"Carmody sent you?"

"Carmody is the master. Yes."

"Why? Do you know why? Was it his idea?"

Just then Reemba squirmed loose by first pretending to go completely limp then suddenly tensing himself and concentrating all his strength and will in an effort to free himself. He did break loose, but there was a snapping sound. He got loose—at the expense of a broken arm.

He rolled away from Ben, grabbing the knife awkwardly in his left hand. He lunged at Ben and the knife scraped against Ben's ribs before he could deflect it with his arm. After that a one-armed Reemba was no match for him and soon Ben had him helpless again.

"Now you'll talk," Ben panted. "And fast. If you try anything like that again, I'll kill you. This was Carmody's idea?"

No answer.

Ben picked up the knife and held it at Reemba's throat. "You tried to kill me

with this. I'll kill you if I have to. Now tell me, was it Carmody's idea?"

"He is my master."

"Is someone else *his* master?"

"The lady master."

"Lady master? What are you talking about?"

"Beautiful lady. Master love her. Do anything."

Lady? thought Ben. He wondered who she could be, or why she had wanted him killed.

"The lady wanted your master to kill me? Then why didn't he do it sooner? He could have had you kill me in my sleep. Why did he wait until today?"

"Kill you, no. Keep you here a month, the lady master said. Master keep you. If couldn't keep you, then kill you. When you left master sent me to kill."

But why? Ben wondered. Why?

"Where can I find this lady?"

"Beautiful lady anywhere. Visit at night with master when you sleep sometime. Wish it."

"Wish it?"

"Wish for her. You see."

"But I don't even know what she looks like or her name."

"Most beautiful lady in the world. Wish for her."

Ben felt foolish doing it, but wished.

The forest wavered. Reemba smiled — and wavered. Reemba did not seem to mind the broken arm, as if the broken arm was in Ben's impression of Reemba, but not Reemba's impression of himself. No, it didn't work that way on Dreamworld, Ben knew. If you were hurt you were hurt. Reemba's face mirrored no pain because Reemba's face was growing faint.

The stream gurgled. Gurgled no more.

The forest grew tenuous, filmy, a shadow of a forest. The gurgling stream became another sound. Faint and far away, then louder. The sound of music. A Viennese waltz, lilting, melodic.

The last thing he heard before the music drowned out everything was Reemba's laughter.

The woman in his arms was astonishingly lovely. She glided there as they waltzed, almost weightless. She looked up at him with a radiant smile and that smile was for him alone, shutting out the rest of the world. She was so utterly, indescribably beauti-

ful that if he shut his eyes he could not even imagine what she looked like although he had seen her but a moment before. She was the living breathing, superbly dancing personification of beauty.

"Darling," she breathed. "I love you so. Stay with me forever."

"Forever," he said. The waltz came to an end. They walked to their table and sat down. The other dancers, other revelers, were shadowy and insubstantial.

"Well, not really forever, darling," she said. Her voice was a paeon to her incredible loveliness. When she stopped speaking it was impossible to imagine the beauty of her voice. "Because you have to leave me in four days," she said. "But let's pretend these four days are forever. Will you do it for me, darling?"

"Whatever you wish," he said. Drinks appeared. They toasted one another and drank. It was nectar. No, it was the waters of lethe, from the stream of Forgetfulness.

"I love you, darling," she said, and leaned forward and kissed him.

Then they were dancing again. They danced and drank and danced and kissed again and the daylight chased the

shadows of night and the other dancers were gone, but they went on tirelessly as if their dancing was fulfillment and forgetting and the beginning of the world and the end. And day became night and the second day and night again.

"Two more days, Johnny," she said.

Johnny? he thought. Now who in the world was Johnny. Ben Storey was his name. "Johnny?" he said.

"Who is Johnny?"

"That's what you called me, Johnny."

"No. Ben."

"You said Johnny."

"Then it was a mistake. What's so important about it? Are you jealous of this—this Johnny?" she asked with laughter.

"No. I was wondering. I don't have to be Ben. I could be Johnny—or anyone I wish. The world is mine."

"The music is playing again. Shall we dance?"

Johnny, he thought, shaking his head. More drinks came, but he left his standing. He did not want to forget now. He wanted to remember.

"Are you tired?" the lovely creature at his side asked. "Take me home and we can rest. I was saving that for the last two days—and nights."

It was temptation. It was more than temptation. It was wonder and life and death and a million years of human love in this one unbelievably lovely woman. A million years of love in two days and two nights and then—what?

"Death," he said out loud.

"What did you say, Ben?"

"Death. I don't know how I know. But if I go with you I'll die. Won't I?"

"We all die, silly Ben."

"I mean in two days, if I stay with you."

"Hold me, Ben. Hold me."

"Carmody!" he called, pushing her away. "Carmody!"

Maybe Carmody knew something. Maybe Carmody could tell him. He willed Carmody into his presence.

The music stopped very suddenly.

The jungle was hot and sultry now, with creeping things and crawling things and calling things. The light filtering down from above was murky and green. Ben began to sweat, but his lovely companion seemed cool and comfortable in linen blouse and shorts, and pith helmet.

Carmody and Reemba came down the path toward them. Reemba's arm was in a sling. "Well, Ben," Carmody said,

smiling. "Old Ben is back. Good to have you with us again, boy. Reemba's been tracking *orlots*."

Reemba flashed a smile. He seemed to bear no malice about the broken arm. "Porter new fellah," Reemba said, looking at Ben's beautiful companion. At first Ben didn't get it. Then he realized that Reemba and Carmody would see what they expected to see or what they wanted to see.

Ben said suddenly: "Bellamy Brothers."

"What was that?" the woman asked him.

"I'm looking for Bellamy Brothers. You've all been trying to stop me. At least to delay me. I want to know why."

Reemba looked at Carmody. "Lady master say—" he began.

"Shut up!" Carmody holered, and Reemba lapsed into hurt silence.

Ben said: "The lady master is right here." Plant the idea, he thought. They would see her. Apparently Carmody loved her or worshipped her or both: they would want to see her.

"Moir!" Carmody gasped. "Moir, what are you doing here?"

Moir. It meant fate.

Somehow it was a good name for her.

"It's all right, Carmody," Moira said. "There are less than two days to go now."

"I tried to keep him here," Carmody said.

"Then be quiet about it. You did a good job, as far as it went."

"Two days to go—for what?" Ben asked.

Carmody looked at Moira, who shrugged.

Ben said, "Then listen to this. Except for the time you walked in on my Secret Service office, Carmody, I've gone from environment to environment passively. But you each have your own unique place to live, don't you? Unless you're willed by someone external into another environment? All right, we're all going to visit a new environment — one of my own choosing. Then maybe I'll get some answers."

Moir looked doubtfully at Carmody. "What's he talking about?"

Carmody said: "He's right, Moira. He hasn't really created his niche here on Dreamworld yet. That office setup where I found him doesn't count: it was only in existence a few minutes. Except for that he's been bouncing around."

Ben thought of the sunside of Mercury. It was hot there. Lead would boil sluggishly. Of course, a human being wouldn't last more than a few seconds, so there had to be some protection. Sunside of Mercury—with a difference. Ben thought of his make-believe world, giving it oxygen, which subdued the direct rays of the sun, giving it lofty escarpments and deep shadow at their bases, where it would be terribly hot but a man might survive for more than a few minutes, although painfully. Sunside of Mercury—with a difference. He thought of Moira's world of Viennese waltzes, and of Carmody's savannah. He felt sorry for Moira. There was something so utterly graceful about the environment she had created for herself, so quietly, gently seductive...

No. It was a trap. Keep thinking about it, Ben told himself, and you'll wind up back there before you know it.

Sunside of Mercury—

Dazzling sun blasted them. Wind-whipped sand stung their faces and exposed hands. The heat was like a furnace. Ben began to sweat and was dripping wet in seconds. He tried to look at the

sky and was momentarily blinded. With Reemba, Carmody and Moira he stood in the shadow cast by an escarpment which reared a thousand feet above their heads into the sky.

Moira's pale lovely skin turned a faint pink almost at once. It was not the sun: the escarpment protected them from that. It was the heat. "Carmody!" she wailed. "You've got to get us out of here."

Ben concentrated his will on the sunside of Mercury. They'd all stay if his will was the strongest there. He had a hunch it would be.

Moira collapsed and sat there on the sand, her shoulders wracked with silent sobs. Carmody looked uneasily at Reemba, then kneeled to comfort the woman. Reemba remained impassive.

"Listen," Ben said. "You can get out of here. I'll let you go—if you answer some questions."

Moira looked up at Carmody. "Can you—can you?"

"I'm trying. He's got a strong world picture. I—I can't shake it."

"Who's Johnny?" Ben asked.

Nobody answered him. He concentrated his will and



suddenly the sun-shielding escarpment was gone. Ben felt the withering blast of heat for a second only, then brought the escarpment back. Moira was gasping. Carmody's face had gone white.

"That's only a sample," Ben said. "Who's Johnny?"

Moira and Carmody exchanged glances. Moira said, "Johnny Mayhem."

"Mayhem!" Ben cried, then smiled. "You mean that was one of my delusions of grandeur at one time? I thought I was Johnny Mayhem?"

"That's it," Moira said. "That's it exactly."

But she had acquiesced too readily, too willingly. Carmody's face showed nothing, but Ben could sense that Carmody's effort to crash through to his own environment had lessened, as if Carmody now thought they could answer Ben's questions quickly and painlessly and get out of there with Ben's permission.

Unsatisfied, Ben willed the escarpment away a second time.

"Stop!" Moira screamed. "Stop! I'll tell you anything! Anything!"

The deep shade returned. "Mayhem," Ben said, "what about him?"

"You're Mayhem. You're

really Johnny Mayhem. Now get us out of here."

Mayhem. He was Johnny Mayhem—in Ben Storey's body, in Ben Storey's diseased mind. The thoughts came rushing back, wildly surging. Mayhem. The thoughts rushed against the barrier of amnesia, engulfing it, crushing it. I'm Mayhem. Johnny Mayhem. Yes. I remember. Bellamy Brothers...

Thirty days. I have thirty days. It's all I ever have. That's why they wanted to keep me occupied. First with the hunt, then with Moira. Twenty-eight days have gone and I haven't found Bellamy Brothers. I don't even know where to look. Have they beaten me?

Something struck his head and he went over face-forward in the hot sand. He got up, spitting a mouthful of sand. They couldn't shake his environment, but while he was preoccupied, they had attacked him. He got up. Carmody hit him again, using the edge of his palm against Ben's jaw. Ben went over backwards and scrambled away when Carmody came for him, kicking. Carmody's rifles had not come through from the savannah. Had they, Ben — Johnny Mayhem — by now would be a dead man.

Johnny managed to get up. He stood waiting for Carmody now, the blood rushing in his ears, but ready. Moira's face appeared all at once behind that of the hunter. Moira lifted her hand, made a throwing motion, flinging sand. Johnny was suddenly blinded and when he held his hands in front of his face defensively, he felt Carmody's big fists pile-driving into his exposed stomach. He leaned forward and clung to the big man. He brought his knee up and Carmody grunted. This was no time for thousand-year-old fair-fighting rules. The fate of the galaxy for the next hundred years might depend on the outcome of this fight, for if Johnny lost he wouldn't find Bellamy Brothers, and if he didn't, if the alien in possession of Brothers' brain could tap it, drain all the information from it...

Johnny clung to Carmody, then butted with his head. Carmody's chin jerked up and back and Johnny drove two stiff fingers against the straining neck, the Adam's apple. Carmody gagged, staggering back. Johnny's eyes smarted, but he could see again. Carmody's face was green. Carmody clutched his throat. He was trying to talk,

but no words came from his open mouth. Johnny moved in on him, hit him once in the belly. It folded the hunter over, jack-knifing him. Johnny stepped back and watched Carmody fall.

He whirled on Moira. "Now, tell me where's Bellamy Brothers?"

Moira shook her head. Her face was twisted into a mask of terror now. She shook her head slowly.

"Really, Johnny Mayhem," a voice said. "Didn't you know?"

He turned quickly. "Reemba!"

But it wasn't Reemba any longer. Even as he watched, the green tracker's face was changing, like a slow superimposure in a motion picture. The new face which Johnny saw was one he remembered from pictures all across the galaxy.

Bellamy Brothers, Chairman of the Council of the Galactic League....

Brothers had a forthright face with earnest eyes and a strong jaw. But there was something else in the eyes now, something which Johnny knew did not belong. "We meet again, Johnny Mayhem," Bellamy Brothers said. Only it wasn't Bellamy Brothers talking.

"You're at an advantage," Johnny said. "You know me. But I never did find out where you came from or what you want—"

"Which is why you can never hope to beat me, you fool! All I have to do is retreat. In a galaxy of a hundred billion stars, how are you going to find me, Johnny Mayhem?"

"What have you done to Bellamy Brothers?"

"Done to him? Nothing! Possession of his mind, a drug to induce temporary insanity, that is all."

But he had been Reemba, Johnny thought. He had been so busy being Reemba that probably he hadn't had the chance to get all the information he wanted. He would get it now, though. He had revealed himself to Johnny, and that meant something. It probably meant that as Reemba he had studied the situation, deciding that his will was stronger than Johnny's, deciding that he could concentrate on the task at hand now, gleaned what information he needed from the mind of Bellamy Brothers.

There was one chance, Johnny knew. The alien sentience was strong—strong. Short of impending death,

it wouldn't leave Bellamy Brothers' mind. But hadn't that happened before? Hadn't the Johnny Mayhem legend begun under similar circumstances, years ago on Earth, when Johnny Marlow assassinated the President of Earth to keep the alien from controlling humanity's mother-planet?

Quicksand, Johnny thought. Quicksand, he willed. If need be, I'll die with him. Isn't this, after all, the mission of Johnny Mayhem? Oh, there were other jobs to be done, important jobs for which the people at the Hub summoned him. This was only the second time in all these years that he had encountered the alien. But wasn't their antagonism, ultimately, the key to the Johnny Mayhem legend, the reason for his being?

Quicksand...

He floundered in it, felt it clutching at his legs, sucking his down slowly, inexorably.

Carmody, still unconscious, lying face down, was dragged under almost at once. Moira floundered over to him, clutching at him, her arms going under. "Carmody!" she screamed. "Carmody!"

But where Carmody had been were only a few slow, sluggishly rising bubbles.

Moira struggled in the em-

bracing sand, flailing at it with her arms. Johnny and Bellamy Brothers stood very still, saving their strength, giving themselves time. Moira began to cry. She was still lovely. She was the loveliest woman Johnny Mayhem had ever seen. He still could not imagine what her face was like if he looked away from her for an instant.

"She isn't real," he said aloud. "She can't be real."

Bellamy Brothers told him: "No. Certainly not. But she would exist here on Dream-world, of course. She's what every man desires in a woman."

Moira was still now. She had been sucked in down to her armpits. She looked mutely, imploringly at Johnny. "Johnny," she said. "Johnny, please."

She did not exist. She was make-believe. And a tool of the alien's now. For if Johnny tried to rescue her, the alien could gain control of the environment, changing it as he wished. Johnny could feel the strength of the alien's will, battling his own. Johnny still held the upper hand, but not by much. If he let his guard waver, if he tried to help Moira...

"Johnny! Johnny, look at

me. I love you. I love you only. I'll always—"

He shut his eyes. When he shut his eyes it wasn't so bad. Then, unable to picture her face, he could wait until the end, retaining control. Then, to escape, he could either will the quicksand out of existence or will into existence a network of branches and twigs for himself.

He opened his eyes. Moira's beautiful head was arched up and back, her chin barely out of the sucking sand—then in it. Her mouth went under. She doesn't exist, Johnny told himself. She isn't real. She doesn't feel this. She has no awareness of existence. Her mouth went under, as her lips formed his name. Her eyes mutely looked at his. Her eyes went under, and her lovely hair.

Bubbles....

The sand sucked at Johnny's waist, at his armpits. Nearby, Bellamy Brothers had sunk almost to his shoulders. He smiled at Johnny. "Your will is strong, Johnny Mayhem."

"Strong enough."

It was a trick—to make Johnny overconfident. He felt his control waver for a moment. The sand grew tenuous, like smoke. He brought his will clamping down and the

sand returned, sucking, tugging.

"You'd die with me?"

"If I have to, yes."

"But together we could rule the universe, don't you see?"

Johnny didn't answer. The quicksand was crawling up his neck now.

"Don't you see, Mayhem? We both have this ability to inhabit whatever body we wish. We both—"

"Not whatever body we wish. Mine has to be a dead one. And yours—I don't know about your ability, but it isn't entirely yours to control, is it? If it was you could enter my mind right now, couldn't you, and battle with me for control?"

The alien did not answer. Bellamy Brothers' chin rested on the sand.

Then, suddenly, his chin jerked up. He looked at Johnny and laughed. "For now," he said, "you win. 'I'll go. I'm going. But I can return. And when I do...'"

Bellamy Brothers' voice trailed off.

Johnny vowed: "Someday I'll find you. If it takes the rest of forever, I'm going to find you."

Was the alien gone? Really gone? Or was this a trick, so

Johnny would will the quicksand out of existence? He said: "Mr. Brothers—can you hear me?"

"Yes, Johnny. Yes."

"I can't will the sand out of existence until we get out. You see, if the environment traps you, you've got to fight your way out before—"

"I know how it works. But don't. Let me die. I have to die. I've—I've been an outsider in my own mind. I know what it's like. I fought it. I haven't told him much, although he controlled me. But I'd weaken. If you let me live and he comes back, the galaxy would be in danger..."

Bellamy Brothers was asking to die. It was no trick, then. The alien was gone.

"But the galaxy needs you. I can't let you die."

"Needs me? No one man is that important. The minute I get out of the sand, he'll return. He'll control me. You must let me die, don't you see? But you have to live. You can fight the alien when he returns—wherever he returns. You're the only one that can. You must let me die!"

Grimly, Johnny knew he was right. But still, he couldn't let Bellamy Brothers go under, dying like that...

Time and the sucking sands settled the problem. Broth-

ers' chin went under. His mouth. His nose. His eyes were happy. This was the right thing, they said. Don't worry. Then his eyes were gone. Then there was nothing.

It took Johnny some moments to free his hands. He created a bridge of branches and twigs, and pulled himself clear of the sand. It took so much effort that when he finally flopped free he was exhausted. He lay there for many minutes on the bridge of branches, over the deadly sand. Where Carmody had died. Where Moira—called fate but really the personification of beauty—had perished. Also where Bellamy Brothers had died that a world-federation might live. Where the alien had fled.

Then Johnny willed himself into Hannibal Wymiss' office.

They contacted the Hub on sub-space radio, and Johnny told his story. Yes, they had another job for him. They would fetch his *elan* as soon as he could tie the loose ends together on Dreamworld. There never was any rest for

Johnny Mayhem, and that was the way he wanted it. Because rest brought loneliness....

There was only one loose end.

"Mrs. Storey's still here," Hannibal Wymiss said.

"Yes, Wymiss, I know. Listen, about the boy. About her son. Tell her this: tell her he went in there on a secret mission. He wasn't crazy at all, understand? He was working for the Galactic League. It was all part of the plan. And he did a great service for the galaxy, then died."

"But you, Mayhem. It was you who did this. Surely..."

Johnny smiled. "Please tell the woman that—for me. She never has to know her son was dead in the first place. Let's make a hero out of Ben Storey. It's the least we can do for her, isn't it?"

"If you say so, Mayhem. I—"

But Mayhem wasn't listening. Mayhem had gone elsewhere. Hannibal Wymiss looked at the dead body of Ben Storey.

Who, as of now, had died a hero's death.

#### THE END

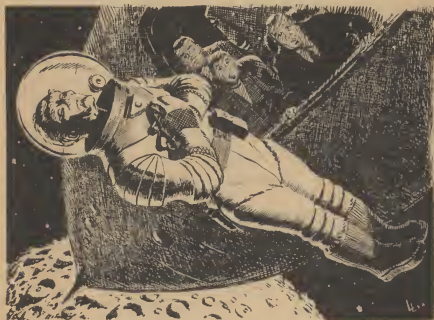
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Read FANTASTIC a NEW kind of fiction.

# THE MONUMENT

By HENRY SLESAR

*Far out on the route of the big space liners, they had a monument which was a symbol of Man's conquest of space. But those who expected heroic grandeur carved in stone were due for a rude awakening.*



THE woman in the feathered cloche came out of the acceleration "coma" first. Norwich, the youthful Captain of the Uppman VI, was surprised. She was fat, almost too fat by space-passenger standards, and he hadn't credited her with the wind. But he was wrong. Her wind was very good indeed.

"They never told us it would be *that* bad!" she wheezed. "You'd think they'd *do* something about it, wouldn't you?"

The heavy-jowled man in the gray business suit grunted his agreement. "It sure costs enough. Three thousand dollars, and a second-class flight at that."

"It's just as bad on the first-class flight," said the Captain, helping the fat woman with her straps. He smiled at her, not too convincingly. "Just a few more frills on first-class service, that's all."

A thin-faced woman behind her asked: "Can we see outside?"

"We'll open the observation window in a few minutes. Then you'll all get a look at space. It's pretty exciting," he added.

"My seat's stuck," the fat woman said testily. "Can you fix it?"

"Stuck? Oh, I see. Sorry, but seats can't be shifted back and forth. It's for your own protection."

"Pretty uncomfortable, if you ask me." The heavy jowled man reached into his suit and came out with a plump cigar.

"Sorry, sir." The Captain stopped him from flicking his lighter. "No smoking permitted. Our ventilation equipment can handle just exactly the oxygen and carbon dioxide we have now. Cigar smoke could throw us off." Norwich allowed a note of severity to creep into his voice. "You were told all that before the blast-off."

"Are we in free orbit now?" said a young man with

horn-rimmed glasses and a briefcase.

"That's right," said the Captain. "I'll have to go forward now. We'll be accelerating again in half an hour."

The fat woman looked dismayed. "Again?"

"It won't be so bad this time," the thin-faced woman said, leaning forward. "Once we're in free orbit, it's easy."

"Have you been up before?" said the young man, a little awe plain in his voice.

"My husband works at New Luna Park. He's the Managing Director." She smiled proudly.

"You must be Mrs. Schonberg, then," the young man said. "I'm Harris of the Architectural Company. I'll be seeing your husband."

"Really?" The thin-faced woman looked pleased. "Isn't that nice? We must all get together some night."

"I hear they charge an arm and a leg at that New Luna Park," said the fat woman. "Special prices for the tourists no doubt."

"I'll just pay so much and no more," said the man in the gray suit. "I got a going price list from my accountant, so I'll know just what I'm paying for."

The fat woman nodded sagely. "Good idea," she said.



She looked up as the co-pilot came striding down the passageway, his lead boots clanking dully. If anything, he was younger than the Captain.

"Is *that* our pilot?" the fat woman whispered.

"Co-pilot," said Mrs. Schonberg.

"He looks like a kid," said the man in the gray suit. "Trusting our lives to kids!"

"Guess you got to be young for space travel," said the youthful architect. He realized the possible implication of his words a little too late. The heavy-jowled man grunted at him and brought out the cigar again.

"You're not going to smoke that?" Mrs. Schonberg asked with a worried frown.

"I'm going to chew it, Madam, *chew* it! Is that all right?"

"When do we eat? I'm starved!" The fat lady reached across the aisle and stopped the co-pilot.

"I'm just going to open the observation window," he said. "I'll be right back." He grinned at her and proceeded on his way.

"But when do we eat?"

"Probably after our second acceleration," said Mrs. Schonberg. "It's only ten o'clock."

"Yes, but we had breakfast hours ago. I don't see why we had to take off so early anyway."

"It's a tight schedule," said the young man. "They have to time the rendezvous pretty close."

"They have to *waste* time, if you want my opinion." The heavy-jowled man shifted his cigar violently to the other side of his mouth. "I thought they were heavy on the red tape in Washington. Hah! They could take lessons from these space jockeys."

"And how!" The fat woman took a candy bar from her purse and munched on it hungrily. "Do you know how many physicals I had to take before I could come on this thing? Four! Can you imagine?"

"I only had one," said the young man mildly.

"Well, the fuss they made over a few pounds! I had to starve myself—literally starve myself! I would have told them where to go—you know, *that* place—except I promised myself this vacation." She looked helplessly around her. "I've *been* everywhere on earth."

"It will all be worthwhile," Mrs. Schonberg assured her. "You'll love the Moon. It's really different, yet you'll be

amazed how much at home you'll feel."

"Well, the shopping ought to be interesting anyway."

"It's all interesting. New Luna Park, of course, and the Uppman Museum . . ."

"Museum?" The cigar really danced in the businessman's mouth. "I've seen every museum worth seeing from the Louvre on. Not one worth writing home about."

"Well, the Uppman Museum is a little different—"

"What is it with this Uppman?" The fat woman crumpled the candy wrapper for emphasis. "Seems to me we've made some sort of tin god out of him. That's not very healthy, if you ask me."

"He *was* a great man," said the thin-faced woman gently.

"We probably wouldn't be here, would we?" said the young man. "I mean, Uppman was a great pioneer—"

"There's a fine statue of him in the Park," said Mrs. Schonberg. "You'll see it, of course."

"Uppman this and Uppman that." The fat woman shoved the wrapper into the seat pocket before her. "I still say it's unhealthy."

The co-pilot came by again. He smiled with official good humor at the passengers, and said: "We'll be accelerating

again in a few minutes. We'll announce the time over the loudspeaker. Hope everything's okay."

Before anyone could answer, he was back in the cabin.

It was the last day of the journey.

The fat woman looked unhappily at the food tray in her lap. "Veal again?" she said.

"If my club wants a report on this trip," said the man in the gray suit, chomping on a muffin, "I'll give it to them in three words: uncomfortable, underfed, and overpriced."

"We don't really *need* too much food on a trip like this," said Mrs. Schonberg. "After all, we get so little exercise . . ."

"You're telling me!" The young man stretched his long legs and grinned.

"Say, you must be working for this company," said the fat woman to Mrs. Schonberg. "Everything they do is okay with you. They could spit on you and you'd like it."

The thin-faced woman blushed deeply. "Well, it's sort of an adventure," she said lamely. "You expect some inconvenience on an adventure." She looked for sympathy towards the architect.

"Think it's getting warm in here?" he said, seeking to change the subject.

"You're right," said the heavy-jowled man, using his napkin across his broad face. "I'm sweating like a pig."

"I hadn't noticed it before," the young man said, loosening his collar. "Temperature's been the same for days."

"Well, it better not get much warmer," said the fat woman threateningly. "I get simply faint with the heat. I spend every summer up north in Canada. Much better for the heart, you know."

The door to the pilot's cabin opened, and Captain Norwich came through.

"Captain!" The heavy-jowled man stopped him.

"I know." Norwich grinned. "We're having a little heat wave. Got a bug in the ventilation, but we'll have it fixed in no time."

"I knew it!" The fat woman began to fan herself feverishly with her purse. "Something's gone wrong. We'll all be roasted to death!"

"It's nothing serious," said the Captain in a reassuring tone. "We'll have it set to rights in five minutes." He continued up the aisle.

Norwich's guess was optimistic. The air grew staler and hotter by the minute as he

explored the ventilating chambers.

"Air! Air!" The fat woman panted heavily, leaned her head back and rolled her eyes. "I'm suffocating!"

"Defective equipment, that's what it is!" The man in the gray suit was so enraged he almost bit his cigar in two. "These old Uppman rockets oughta be broken up for scrap. Mismanagement, that's what I call it!"

"It sure is hot," the young architect admitted, thinking about the stories of space burn he had heard.

"Where's that Captain? He's been gone an hour!"

The co-pilot appeared.

"What's happening?" cried the fat woman. "Are we falling into the sun?"

"Certainly not," the co-pilot answered. "Don't worry. It's just a valve. We ought to have it fixed soon. Even if we did run into some difficulty, we're already in the Moon's gravitational field. We could have a rescue ship here in ten minutes."

"Rescue ship?" the fat woman said. It was obviously the wrong kind of answer to give her. "We're in trouble!" she shrieked. "We'll all be killed!"

Luckily, Captain Norwich came out of the chambers in

time to calm her. "It's all fixed," he said. "We ought to be back at normal temperature in a few minutes. Sorry for the inconvenience."

"Sorry?" The man in the gray suit shifted himself in his chair and snapped the cigar out of his mouth. "You'll be sorry when we land, young man. I'm going to report this."

"It's already been reported, sir," said Norwich, impatiently. "This isn't the newest ship in the world, and little things happen to it. But the Uppman VI is as safe as anything in space."

"It's a dirty old wreck of a ship," said the fat woman heedlessly. "And don't think I won't let the company know it. I can assure you I've never had such an unpleasant trip in my life!"

*"Look!"*

It was the young architect, eyes on the observation window.

"What is it?" said Mrs. Schonberg.

The man in the gray suit looked worried. "What's going on? What's happening now?"

The architect swallowed hard. "There's something out there."

"Where?"

"Floating in space. I'm sure I saw it."

"Probably a meteorite or something," said Mrs. Schonberg.

"Meteor?" said the heavy-jowled man.

"Oh, my God, my God!" wailed the fat woman. She began to sob. "I knew something would happen to me! I knew when I first stepped on this thing!"

"It's not a meteor," said the Captain sharply. "There's no reason to be afraid."

"It's a body." The young man's voice dropped to a whisper. "It's a man in a space suit. Just floating out there."

"My God!" The cigar dropped from the businessman's mouth and fell to the floor. It lay there forgotten, its end black and moist.

"Do something!" said Mrs. Schonberg. "Can't we do something?"

The architect mopped his brow. "He can't be alive."

"He isn't." The Captain walked to the observation window and studied the still form as it floated to the glass. Then he removed his cap, slowly. The movement was respectful.

"Then what is it?" said the fat woman. "What's it doing out there?" She looked plead-

ingly at the others. "Haven't they done enough to us on this trip?"

"It's nothing to be afraid of. I told you that. It's only a monument," said the Captain softly. "The grave of a great man."

The passengers looked at each other.

"You mean it's Uppman?" the architect said. "John Uppman?"

"But he's dead," the man in the gray suit said. "He's been dead for fifty years!"

"It's horrible!" The fat woman covered her eyes. "Why don't they take him in. Why don't they bury him?"

"He is buried," said the

Captain. "This is the grave he requested in his last will and testament."

The co-pilot came out of the cabin and joined the Captain by the window.

"But *why*?" said the fat woman.

The Captain turned to her.

"As a reminder," he said curtly, slapping the cap back on his head. "To remind us all how tough it was to get here."

Almost angrily, he pulled the lever that closed off the observation window. But before the doors met, they caught one last glimpse of the body as it drifted in stately procession past their eyes.

**THE END**

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## WHAT WAS THE HORRIBLE SECRET OF THIS STRANGELY-CUT DIAMOND?



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# The Last Chord

By KARL STANLEY

*The Pierre Nicolle viola at the auction meant nothing to Pete until the bidding got to seven thousand. Then he had to bail out the blonde bidder with his own cash. He called himself a sucker. How was he to know that the forces of destiny were at work?*

THIS is the kind of day, Peter Virio thought, that I should be shooting crap, or playing the daily double, or making a pass at the blonde model who lives down the hall. This is *my* day. He fingered the thick roll of greenbacks in his pants pocket. Five hundred and fifty bucks. Five hundred of it there because his room number at the hotel was 345, and he had played a single dollar on that number with Charley, the bell captain.



Far out in space,



mystic forces were responding.

He smiled to himself, looking up at the chaste lettering on the window — BARRET-HAYES—and below it, in much smaller letters, *Auctioneers*. Pete Virio made a small bow toward the name and went into the auction room.

There were perhaps a hundred people in the room. Not a large crowd. But Pete, wise to the ways of auctions, knew this to be a monied crowd. He had spent an hour, the day before, going through the catalogued items on display in an upstairs room, and knew this wasn't the kind of auction to draw the Broadway crowd. It took money to bid and buy a Stradivarius violin or an illustrated Shakespeare with the rare seventh volume.

Pete figured there was a good chance he'd get that Meissen tankard with the gilded silver inlay if he could keep the bidding low. Just a chance. But then this was his day. The doubts went winging out of mind.

There were a couple of empty chairs in the second row, directly in front of the auctioneer. He took one behind a slim, straight-shouldered girl in a cream-colored linen suit. He noticed the ash-blond hair done in a pony style, the hair at the back

caught up with a wisp of pale green ribbon. The straightness of her shoulders and the posed set of her head took his mind from the auction for an instant. He leaned sidewise for a glimpse of her profile. Chaste was the only word to describe it. Pale, classic and definitely *stay away*.

The drone of the auctioneer's voice dropped a number into Peter Virio's consciousness. He remembered the item number. It was from the Frank Warmbocker music collection, an Amati violin. The talker on the stand gave a quick summary of the violin's history then started the bidding. It went for thirty-five hundred dollars to someone in the rear. The next number was on a Pierre Nicolle viola. A sudden movement of the cream-colored shoulders on the chair in front caught Pete's attention. It seemed they had set even stiffer, if that was possible. So she was interested in the viola.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the auctioneer said. "Before the bidding begins on this next number, let me apprise you of the rareness of such an event. Although there are a hundred or so Nicolle violas in existence this is only the second time one of them



has been offered in such a sale. It is indeed a rare and not to be denied opportunity. The bidding will open at two thousand. Do I hear twenty-one hundred? . . ."

In a matter of seconds the bidding went up to three thousand. It stayed there for a few seconds; then, at the auctioneer's second call, the girl said, "Thirty-two hundred."

Pete gave her an admiring glance. Though her voice had been distinct, it had also been casual. Something made him bend slightly and whisper to the girl, "Thirty-five'll take it."

It was as if she hadn't heard.

A new voice entered the bidding. "Thirty-five hundred dollars," the voice said. A man was standing at the far right, before the last seat in the same row as Pete Virio. He was slightly above medium height, in dark clothes, and bare-headed. His dark hair was slick and brushed smoothly back and parted at a widow's peak. His face was lean and long and expressionless.

The girl said, "Thirty-seven . . ."

"Four thousand," the man said.

"Forty-two," came from the girl.

"Five thousand," said the man.

The auctioneer broke in. "May I remind you that this item goes for cash only! Do I hear fifty-one hundred, ladies and gentlemen? . . ."

"But it's not worth it," the girl whispered. "It isn't, really. Fifty-two," she said aloud.

Pete caught the edge of desperation in her voice. But his attention was taken by the man. He saw the tip of a tongue come out, dart back. It was the only sign of anything the man showed. To Pete it was like a red lantern. One bid more, maybe two. Once more Pete leaned toward the girl.

"Fifty-three," the man said.

"Go fifty-five," Pete whispered.

She didn't seem to hear. But he saw her teeth nibble at the corner of her lip.

"Go *fifty-five!*" It was a command.

When she said, "Fifty-five," it was as if she was prepared to make it in thousands instead of hundreds so casual was her voice. Pete hid a grin in his palm.

"Six!" said the man in the dark suit. And there was no doubting that this was his last

bid. His voice made it quite plain.

"That's his load," Pete said. "Seven takes it."

This time she turned full face to him. Her eyes were violet. Narrowed and wide-set and burning with anger. "And now what do I do?" she asked.

"Say seven," Pete said blithely.

"I don't have seven," she said. "I'm short five hundred."

"Say it, and slip me your hand," Pete said.

". . . Going for six twice," said the auctioneer.

"Damn it! Say *seven*!"

"Seven," said the girl.

Pete took the roll of bills from his pocket. It was considerably thinner after he peeled five hundred from it. He reached over, took her hand and slipped the money into it. "Now you've got it," he said.

There was no other bid.

She stood up and Pete rose with her. She opened her purse and put the five hundred dollars inside and fiddled around for a second or two until she found what she wanted. She thrust it at him. It was a small calling card. "I'm Kristine Elgar," she said. "That's my father's card. He's Donald Elgar, the

collector. If you will call at the number there this afternoon my father will reimburse you."

He looked down at the card. By the time he looked up she was gone. He saw her standing at the desk next to the podium. She was handing a roll of bills to the man seated behind the desk. Something made Pete turn to look for the man who had bid against her for the viola. He was gone.

"I guess this makes you the oddball of the city," Pete whispered as he made his way past the people in his row. He paid no attention to their curious stares. "Not even a thank you." He smiled to himself. Not quite a smile. More a grimace. Call me Kristine, he thought. Yeah! There are other things I can call you. But why blame you? Me, I'm the one who goofed. Five hundred fish. Damn! I'll bet I could have got that Meissen tankard. Oh, well. Easy come, easy go.

Low-hanging oily clouds filled the sky. He tried to light a cigarette but found it too hard against the sudden wind that had arisen. He stepped into a doorway a few doors beyond the Barret-Hayes place. As he started out of the doorway he saw

the girl again. She had the viol in a case under her arm. She was standing at the curb as though waiting for a cab. A black Cadillac edged its way alongside. For a second a face showed at the window nearest the curb. It was the face of the man who had done the bidding against her. The window was down and Pete saw the man say something to the girl. She shook her head, but after a second nodded and stepped into the car. As the Cadillac went by Pete noticed it was chauffeur driven. He also made a mental note of the license number.

Donald Elgar drummed his fingers on the desk top. They didn't sound as loud as the rain against the panes of his windows, thirty-six stories up. He made a sucking sound with his lips. "I don't understand," he said. "Kristine had definite instructions not to go beyond five thousand. Oh, if it were a matter of a hundred or so I could understand. But seven. Nonsense!"

Pete Virio crossed his legs again and lit another cigarette. He had been sitting in Elgar's office for the better part of two hours now. Kristine not only hadn't showed up, she hadn't even called.

Pete knew he wasn't going to get the five hundred dollars out of her father until she gave the sign for it to be released. He was beginning to wonder if he hadn't been had. He gave it another try. "Look, Mr. Elgar, Dave Barrett knows me. He saw me hand the dough to your daughter. Why don't you call him?"

Elgar made a vague move with his right hand. "I don't understand what made her go beyond five," he said. It was as though he hadn't even been listening to Virio. "She knew the instructions of my client. He'll never agree to reimburse me the sum." Suddenly he turned his eyes up to Pete's. "And if he doesn't, young man, you haven't got the ghost of a chance of getting it from me."

Pete came to his feet and leaned over the desk. "Y'know," he said, "I had an idea I'd goofed when I gave her that dough. Because it wasn't till then that I spotted her for the phony she was. So what you're saying doesn't surprise me. But since it is my dough I'm going to get a run for it. I'm staying in this office till she shows. That is if you don't mind?"

"But I do mind. Very much. I don't like your . . .

type." Elgar's eyes, which had been vague and wandering, fixed themselves sharply on Pete's. "I don't like any of this, Kristine's absence, your being here with what seems like a palpable cock-and-bull story . . . No! I don't like it. Excuse me." He dragged the phone close and dialed a number. "Hello. Dave Barret there? Tell him Donald Elgar's on the wire." Elgar continued to stare at Pete while he waited for Barret to come on. "Dave, this is Elgar here. My daughter bid in on a Nicolle viola you had? Yes, that's right . . . It did go for fifty-seven. H'mm. Know a Pete Virio? . . . I see. Notice whether he gave Kristine some money? . . . Um hmm . . . She didn't say where she was going, did she? I thought probably not. Okay, Dave, thanks."

Elgar replaced the receiver and began to drum with his fingers again. Then he rubbed his nose for a second, his eyes lowered. Finally he lifted them, sighed, and said: "Dave said you gave Kris something, he didn't know what. Could have been a cigarette for all he knew. Anyway Dave knows you. He didn't go into detail. Suppose we do this; give me your address, and when Kris shows

up I'll get in touch. Is that all right?"

"What are we going to get in touch about?" Pete asked. "To maybe let me know the cigarette I gave her wasn't her brand? Thanks, anyhow." He pulled his wallet out and flipped a card in front of Elgar.

Elgar didn't touch the card. He read the information, then turned up a stony face. "Private investigator. I knew there was something about you I didn't like. Key-hole peeper, divorce fixer. Okay Virio. My secretary will call."

"Tell her not to bother," Pete said. He grinned crookedly. "That five hundred I gave your daughter, that bought me in on the viola. I'm going out to look up my investment . . . partner."

Philip Malsen morosely watched the rain pounding the terrace. The wind was whipping the branches of the row of potted trees bordering the outside ledge. Small piles of sodden leaves huddled by the legs of the three metal tables. Malsen turned his head and stared heavy-eyed at the man on the curved green sofa beside him. It was the man who had been at the auction.

"I don't like it," Malsen said.

"I couldn't risk her going off with the viola," the man on the sofa said.

"But what about the other man, the one who gave her the money?"

The man on the sofa lifted one shoulder slightly.

"This is not the time for needless risks," Malsen said.

"I don't agree," the other said. "This was the last of the violas in private hands. You said so. In forty-eight hours nothing will matter. I told John to destroy the instrument . . ." He lifted both hands and held them palms up.

"And the girl?"

"Upstairs. You can let her go tomorrow."

"Yes," Malsen said. "I suppose that is so. It won't matter then. "If only . . ."

"Oh, stop it! We've checked, rechecked and cross-checked. One hundred and eighteen of the signature violas were made . . ."

Malsen pounded a fist into a palm with a sharp sound. "And we have managed to get them all except those in museums. Three years we've spent gathering them. Precious little instruments of destruction. But if there's a single one—"

"There isn't. This was the last. Would you like to see the girl?"

"Later. First get in touch with the Barret-Hayes people and see what you can get on this man who was with the Elgar girl. I don't like loose ends. Let's tie this one."

Pete Virio shook hands with Dave Barret, declined the offer of a cigar and sprawled wide-legged in the leather club chair.

"What's with you, Pete?" Barret asked. "First Elgar wants to know about you, then just a few minutes ago someone else calls and wants to know who and what you are and where he can reach you."

"Yeah? Any idea who the second party was?"

"No-o. I could guess, though. Could be the guy who bid on the Nicolle item."

"That's good enough for me, Dave. Nothing gets by you. You saw me slip the Elgar girl the money."

Barret pursed his lips and blew three perfect smoke rings. "Only time I can do that is when there isn't a breath of wind stirring," he said. "And me, I don't aim to stir too much."

"Well, I think I made a five hundred dollar investment in

something. What do you think of it?"

"Hard to say, Pete. Three years ago that viola wouldn't have brought a thousand dollars. Matter of fact, Warmbocker offered it to me for eight hundred and I turned it down. So I'm not so smart either. But then you ought to know about these things. Three weeks ago you bid in on a Meissen tankard at three-fifty. How many does that make, Pete?"

"Sixteen. So what? I find Meissen China in those tankards are perfect beer glasses. And I like beer."

"But sixteen of them. That money you said you let the Elgar girl have, that would have got you the seventeenth, wouldn't it? So as nearly as I can see, you're as bad as any other collector."

"Okay, Dave. You've made your point. Now tell me. How much do you figure that viola's worth?"

"A million bucks—to the guy who can afford that kind of money. Look. I run a high-class auction. If I draw a hundred people I got a mob. So there's maybe twenty 'mockies' in the crowd, the rest are buyers. I *know* 'em. A guy like Elgar figures he's gonna pull a fast one. Sends his daughter. I know Kristine. A

smart and pretty girl. Nice girl."

"Nuts!"

"No, Pete, she's real class. Smart, too. But me, I'm Dave Barret, I've been feeding the monkeys these characters got riding their backs. Elgar's an agent. That's his money end. I know every man he's working with. It's my business to know. Today I didn't have but one item that he'd walk across the street to look at, except maybe the Shakespeare folios. But Kris don't bite on that. So it had to be the viola. So I lift the opening bid a grand above what it should be. I will admit I was surprised to have it go for what it did. But, like I say, if someone wanted it enough . . ."

"Well, I didn't. By the way, anyone get the Meissen piece?"

"No." Barret grinned and blew smoke at Pete. "I'll give you a good buy on it, Pete. Three hundred."

"Save it, Dave. I'm out to get my five hundred back first."

The wind had blown the rain and humidity out of the air. The sky was clear. Pete looked at his wrist watch and whistled at the time it showed. Three. Where the heck's the

day gone? he wondered. He walked up to Fifty-seventh and turned east and walked over to Lexington where he went into the Mayflower on the corner. He had a hamburger and a milk shake, and planned the balance of the afternoon. When he was finished he went across the street to the drug store and made his first call. The operator on his phone service told him he had had no calls. His second call got better results.

"Murray," Pete said, "this is Pete Virio. Want a favor. Okay?" He nodded and smiled at the answer. "And the same to your family," he said. "Check this license number, will you, Mur, and call it in to my service. Yeah. So I'll owe you two drinks. I'll give you a ring later, and maybe we'll have a short one together. 'Bye now." He put the slip of paper with the Cadillac license number back in his jacket pocket, fished up another dime and dialed another number.

A bright happy voice told this was the Continental Broadcasting Company.

He asked for Steve Harmon and was told his line was busy and would he wait. He said he would, and after a moment Harmon's voice came on. "Steve, this is Pete Virio.

Check me if I'm wrong. You are free after three-thirty?"

"Right as the weather," Harmon said. "And . . ."

"I want to see you."

"Sure thing. Nothing to do till my five o'clock show. The York all right with you?"

"Fine. Tell Julius not to forget the onion in my chopped liver. See you in a while."

. . . Harmon had a small plate of Ritz crackers and a Gibson in front of him. Julius, the spry little waiter with the ageless face, was hovering over Harmon like a fussy governess over a problem child.

"I keep telling Mr. Harmon," Julius grumbled. "You don't take candied yams with corned beef and cabbage. Gas. It's not good for the voice . . ."

"It's the gas in his voice that makes his public love him," Pete said. "Gas and Harmon are a well-known combination. As for me, a gin-and-tonic and a small, but small, plate of chopped liver. And don't forget . . ."

"The onion," said Julius as he shuffled off.

"I might as well say," Harmon said after he drained the last of the Gibson, "that we're not interested in private eye stories, true or not. Right now the big thing in TV is hospital shows. Now if you have a stray scalpel or suture or even

a beautiful nurse, that, my dear Watson, would be just the thing."

"Nope. Me, I'm just interested in a stray Pierre Nicolle viola. So maybe you could give me the score?"

"Stolen . . .?"

"No. Just lost, for the moment. I bought a five-hundred-buck interest in one this morning, at Dave Barret's."

"I thought your love was Meissen tankards."

Pete grinned and took a long swallow of the gin-and-tonic Julius had placed before him.

"Well, first, how big is the other interest?"

"Fifty-two hundred dollars worth."

Harmon whistled. "Man! You're crazy. For that dough I know a Stradivarius I can buy."

"And that's why I come to you, stupid," Pete said. "You are the music encyclopedia. What is it with these violas?"

Harmon nibbled on a cracker, then swallowed it in a single gulp. "They're not the greatest. Not even second. Nicolle made a hundred and twenty of them, give or take a couple, and they all have the same structural weakness. On certain bowing passages in a minor key, they give a hollow mournful sound that drive all

virtuosi crazy. A great viola player will refuse to use a Nicolle. But the man did make some great violins. Why they've become collectors' items is a mystery to me."

Julius put a halt to the discussion for a while. He served silently, voicing his disapproval only at the end. "Sweet potatoes with corned beef and cabbage! A fine Irishman!"

The two men ate in silence. Suddenly Harmon stabbed his fork at Pete. "Hey! I just remembered something. Maybe you didn't do too badly. I used to get all kinds of odd questions thrown at me when I was running that music quiz a year and a half ago. Who wrote this, who played that, what instrument is used in this passage. I got a phone call one day about the Nicolle viola. Some guy wanted to know how many were in existence, where they were to be found, who owned them. Offered me a nice piece of change, as I remember. I'll think of the guy's name in a minute. Some big shot. Uh . . . Mansel! Philip Mansel, that's it! . . ." Harmon busied himself with the food for a minute, his mind reconstructing what had happened. "We had a small file on Mansel in our morgue. Some kind of finan-



cier, interested in mines or mining. Anyway a big shot. I called a couple of dealers about the viola. Finally one I called turned out to be the guy who told Mansel to call me. This man told me Mansel was hot on the Nicolle viola. Had a standing offer to buy any or all he could get. Wanted a corner on the market, I guess. The dealer's name, in case you might want it, was Sal Fiometta on Sixth Avenue."

Pete wrote the name and address in his note book.

"Could be you bought in on a good piece of property," Harmon said in conclusion.

"Gotta find it first," Pete said. He finished the last of the chopped liver. He knew Steve was curious about the viola and what had happened to it. But he couldn't say anything more than he had. Not until all the facts he had gathered made more sense than they did. He fished a couple of dollars out of his pocket and put them on the table. "Steve, thanks a lot. A real pal. I'll let you in on the score when the game's over. See you."

Although the music dealer's place was only a few blocks from the restaurant, Pete decided to call the man

on the phone, rather than go over to see him personally. He went into the Whelan store on the corner and made the call from there. Fiometta remembered the incident all right. "Mansel? . . . A real nut, but with money. He's probably got every Nicolle in existence by now. Sure, he had a standing offer of ten thousand minimum for each one I could pick up. Hah! Only ones left are hid away in museums. I even went to Europe twice for him, all expenses paid and everything. I should find one more customer like him I would retire tomorrow . . ."

Pete filed the information, thanked Fiometta, hung up, then called his service. The girl had a message for him. The license for the Cadillac had been issued to a Philip Mansel of 4412 Park Ave.

Mansel studied the card, jerked his head to the manservant who had ushered Pete Virio into the room, and said: "What can I do for you, Mr. Virio?"

"Suppose you tell me," Pete said. "I hear you're having me paged around town."

"So you decided to come to see me, eh?"

"Unh hunh. I got curious. About a couple of things.

Number one: your agent picked up Miss Elgar after the auction; why? Number two: she hasn't been returned, I don't think; why? Number three: what did you want to see me about?"

"Don't be disturbed about Miss Elgar. She is all right. She took ill in the car and my man decided to bring her here. She is under medication at the moment. As soon as she is well enough to leave I shall send her home."

"And the Nicolle viola; will that go with her?"

"What concern is that of yours?"

"Five hundred bucks worth. I gave her that much to outbid your man. So I'm a partner in that viola."

"The viola is . . . safe."

"How come you didn't call Elgar? He was really quite concerned about his daughter."

"I didn't want him to worry," Mansel said smoothly.

"Now that's real nice of you," Pete said. "Me, I'm not so nice. All I want to know is what do you intend doing about the viola?"

"I said it was safe."

"That's fine. How much?"

"How much what?"

"Are you offering for the viola?"

"I don't follow you, Mr. Virio. I really don't."

"You mean you didn't make the Elgar girl an offer for it?"

"But why should I?"

"Because everyone in town who knows the score on a Nicolle viola has told me how interested you are in them."

"Why don't you stop fencing with him, Mansel," a voice from behind Pete said.

Pete turned. A man was facing him. It was the man who had been at the auction. There was a gun in his hand.

"Virio's done us a favor. He's come here. That ties up the loose end."

Pete turned his head: "Why don't you tell this joker who I am?"

Mansel said nothing.

"Look, Mansel," Pete continued. "I'm a private cop. No matter what I'm doing, unless I'm out of town, I report in to my office every hour. When I don't, the girl waits fifteen minutes. If she doesn't hear from me she calls the police. Just like that. And everybody in town knows I've been asking about you. Where do you think the cops will come?"

"Let them come," the man with the gun said. "We can stall them for forty-eight

hours. What difference after that?"

"None," Mansel said quietly. "I just didn't want things to end this way. Everything was going smoothly. Now violence. Violence breeds more violence. Questions will be asked. I, and you too, should have learned that the police of this country are efficient. They have means of getting to the bottom of mysteries."

"Are you getting soft? We are dead men anyhow. Dedicated and doomed. That was the price of our mission. Death. But we found and destroyed what we came to find. Now the planet is ours."

"You talk too much," Mansel said. "You talked too much when the mission was planned. I told Ormlu that."

"I don't talk enough. We share responsibility, you in your field, I in mine. I say execute this man, and the girl. The viola has been destroyed. The last of them, remember! Stand still Virio, or you die now!"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Pete said. He felt the sweat break out on his face. The palms of his hands were wet. He knew something was being talked over that was far more mysterious than any viola, and

that he and the girl were going to die. Unless . . . Unless what? "Mansel's right about the cops. They won't rest until . . ."

"Until nothing. There won't be any cops, or New York or any city on this planet in a few days," the man with the gun said. "Up with your hands, and turn around."

Pete turned as he was ordered. He had seen the murder in the man's eyes.

"You want to know about the viola. I'll tell you. There is a fleet of space ships out there made of an indestructible metal. Not even the blast of a thermonuclear explosion could destroy them. Yet the single chord played on a Nicolle viola could do what no other force could. That chord creates a breaking-down process in the fibre of the metal which disintegrates it completely. We came here and managed to discover the instrument that was the same as the one on our planet. Well, there are no more, except in museums. And they cannot be removed to be played over the radio. That was our fear. That somewhere on this Earth someone would be playing a Nicolle viola over the air when the space armada was

coming in. Not now. Nothing to fear now. Satisfied, Mr. Virio?"

"Yeah, I'm satisfied. What do you do now, kill us together? Or do we get a run for our money . . .?"

"Not here." Mansel said. "Take him upstairs to the girl."

"Yes," the man with the gun said. "You always hated bloodshed. This will be a pleasure for me. Up you go, Virio, and don't make any funny moves. I am a nervous man."

There's always a chance, Pete thought as he went up the curving carpeted steps. I don't know what kind, but I'm still in one piece. He stopped at the second landing at the command of the man behind him.

"Second door to the right of the stairs . . ."

The man with the gun covered Pete while he knocked on the door. It opened and a man came out. He, too, held a gun.

"We have Virio," the first man said. "Go downstairs. Inside, Virio. Miss Elgar may need consoling."

It was a large sitting-bedroom. Kristine Elgar rose from the chaise lounge and came toward him. She walked

steadily, but Pete saw the effort it was taking for her to appear calm. She was at the breaking point.

"Looks like we'd been better off if I'd have minded my own business," he said lightly.

"They destroyed the viola," she said. "That man, he's like a snake. I don't know what to think. I don't know what they want of me. They won't tell me. They just put the guard here with me, and he didn't so much as say boo these past four hours." She was standing inches from him. She continued to talk as if by talking she would be stopped from screaming, as if talking held her together. "Are they crazy? Sometimes collectors are, you know. But to get what he wanted and then break it to pieces. He smashed it until it wasn't even fit for kindling. What do they want of me . . . us?"

He took her hand and led her back to the lounge and pushed her gently down into it. "Look," he said, "we're in a jam. Pretty bad. You've been here for four hours. Have they left you alone for any time?"

"Yes. There's no place to escape, if that's what you're looking for. The windows open onto the terrace, but

they're closed. There's a bathroom in there, but no outside door." She pointed to the door they had come in. "That's the only way out that I know of."

"What's in the bathroom that we could use?"

"Not even toothpaste," she said.

"I'll have a look."

It was as she said. Not even a glass. The room and bath were evidently designed for feminine use. There was a large dressing table in the bathroom, but it was bare of accessories. Pete ran his fingers around the plastic material that trimmed the edge of the table. He saw his image in the mirror. It was grim and tired. Suddenly he smiled, and tore the plastic material from around the table edge. The girl was sitting as if she hadn't stirred since he left her. She stared at the streamer of plastic he was carrying.

"Y'know," he said, "as a cop I guess I wouldn't fit in a story. No gun. I never carry one. And these jokers didn't even frisk me. But I got a cigarette lighter. So maybe we can get a gun. This is an old gimmick I once saw in a movie. And I have a funny idea these guys haven't been here long enough to have seen that old 'B' picture I'm thinking of. Now here's what you

do when I set those drapes on fire. Stand in front of the door so he'll see you as soon as it opens. I'll be to one side of it. Scream like you've never screamed before. And mean it!"

He went to the drapes covering the French doors leading to the terrace, flicked his lighter and held it to the edge of one of the drapes. Presently a small flame flickered, and ran brightly upward. The flame spread until the drape was ablaze. Pete backed away from it, stood for a second watching, then whirled and ran across the room. He grabbed the girl by one arm, planted her facing the door and went to stand beside the door. The plastic material was now held in both hands.

"Go ahead and scream," he said.

She would have wakened the dead. There was no mistaking the fear in her voice. Already the room was filling with smoke. The flames had attacked the wide cornice to which the drapes were attached. Suddenly there was a sharp sound of breaking glass. Air rushed into the room, carrying with it a choking cloud of smoke. Flames and smoke poured out

into the open. And Kristine Elgar screamed like a madwoman.

The door opened with a crash. Standing just outside beyond reach was the man with the gun.

"That crazy man's set the room on fire!" Kristine screamed as she stumbled forward. "Please let me out. Please . . ."

The man with the gun took a step, another, head thrust forward, eyes trying to pierce the thick smoke, and then he took a third step. And Pete moved swiftly. He thrust the plastic material around the man's throat and pulled with all his strength, hands pulling away from each other.

Seconds later the man hung limply in the plastic noose about his neck. Pete let him fall, grabbed up the gun, turned and said, "Let's go, kid."

Now the hall was filling with smoke. They could hear the hoarse sounds of men's voices below. Pete moved warily forward, the girl a step behind him. They were halfway down the stairs when Pete saw a man coming toward him. The man shouted something and raised his arm. Pete squeezed the trigger gently. The gun barked and the man facing them

went over backward and tumbled down the stairs.

"Two down and one to go . . . maybe," Pete said softly. "Come on, fire department."

There were several voices shouting now, so Malsen was not the only one left. Pete stopped, faced the girl. "Listen, just listen and don't ask questions, and please do what I tell you to. To the right of the steps at the bottom is the outside door. Somehow I'll manage to hold them off. Get out and first thing call Steve Harmon at C.B.C. Tell him Pete Virio said he's got to get hold of a Nicolle viola and have someone broadcast its playing over the air. Continuously for the next three days. Got it?"

She nodded.

"Okay, babe, let's go."

Suddenly there was the long shrill screaming as from a distance of a siren. And presently the sound of another, closer now. The sound of the fire behind them was a roar now, the smoke thicker, more choking. Pete no longer moved slowly. He took the last steps in a wild rush, the girl following as swiftly as she could. Two men stood at the bottom, and from the corner of an eye Pete saw Malsen standing at the door of the large room he had been

ushered into. All three men held guns.

Pete squeezed the trigger with deliberate care, and counted the shots. Bright spurts of flame came up to meet him. One of the men screamed once, clutched his face and fell. The other kept shooting but hurriedly. Then he too fell. The way to the door was open.

Pete took the last three steps in a single leap, whirled to face Malsen. Suddenly there was a draft of fresh air about him. The door was open, and Kristine was no longer with him.

Malsen said: "I said I hated violence. I told him it would end this way."

"You were right," Pete said. He suddenly felt very tired. A streamer of thick dark blood flowed to his feet and sluggishly touched one of his shoes.

"I'm afraid it was all in vain for you," Malsen said, and fired.

Something hit Pete Virio a tremendous blow in the chest and sent him staggering backward. His eyes rolled and his arms went limp. He fell back against the wall. Somehow he managed to focus his glance to the man in the doorway. Flame spilled from the muzzle of Malsen's gun. Pete scream-

ed as the bullet ripped the flesh from his cheek.

He didn't try to bring the gun up high. Just to his hip where he could hold it firmly against. Once more Malsen fired. Pete felt nothing. Only the warm feel of the trigger. The gun bucked in his hand, then dropped from his limp fingers.

Malsen went rigid for a second, then fell flat on his face.

There was light above, a rounded-blob of it. There was a smell of disinfectant. Then a voice:

"Look! He's opened his eyes."

Pete Virio opened his eyes and looked into the violet ones of Kristine Elgar. "Hi," he said.

"Hello, hero. Listen . . ."

The warm sound of a viola filled the air. It played single notes, scales, passages in every key, and finally a passage that made Pete shudder it sounded so hollow, so lost. It was the last chord.

Suddenly the girl's face went away. A strange face, a man's appeared. Narrow eyes behind glasses peered into his.

Kristine said: "Can he talk, Doctor?"

"Yes, not for long or much, though."

And once more he was staring into violet pools. "Your friend Steve was wonderful. He got a Nicolle viola from the Fosdick Museum. They've been playing it for three days now. That was the last broadcast. Listen . . ."

A man's voice: "And so for the last time the haunting strains of the Nicolle viola has filled the air. We have just learned that Peter Virio is out of danger. As you all know it was his request that he wanted to hear the Nicolle viola played on the air. C.B.C. has felt proud and honored that it was able to accede to the request of this brave and heroic man who risked his life to save that of Miss Kristine Elgar who had been kidnapped by Philip Malsen for the Nicolle viola she had purchased. Although seriously

wounded, Peter Virio had fought to his last breath. So just a last personal note. Get well quick, Pete, Julius said the chopped liver'll be on the house next time . . ."

There was a click and the voice went off.

He looked up into her eyes and thought: "Better this way. Who'd believe a story about space ships. I wouldn't." He tried to smile and moaned instead. Warm lips brushed his forehead.

"Say, Kris," he said, "I like auctions, don't you?"

He saw her nod.

"Y'know, let's make a habit of going to 'em together, hunh?"

"For the rest of your life, if you want," she said.

This time he was able to smile in spite of the pain . . .

THE END



"DADDY!"



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# RUN OF LUCK

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The Native was happy to be stepped on.

# Run of Luck

By CALVIN KNOX

*It looked like a soft touch to Steve Crayden. The odd-balls on this planet were looking for a god to worship and they seemed to think he filled the bill. He was more than willing and entered right into the spirit of the thing. But there was a matter of interpretation. Did the terms they used really mean what he thought they meant? Or something far different?*

STEVE Crayden growled in anger as the dials on the control panel spun crazily around telling him that the little cruiser was out of control.

He frowned and glanced at the screen. There was only one thing to do—crash-land the ship on the tiny planet looming up just ahead. It was the lousiest twist possible—after he had lied and cheated and killed to get off the prison planet of Kandoris, here he was being thrown right back into cold storage again. Maybe not behind bars, this time, but being marooned on a little bit of rock was just as much of an imprisonment as anything.

He brought the stolen ship down as delicately as he could. It maintained a semblance of a landing orbit until a hun-

dred meters above planetfall, and then swung into a dizzying tailspin and burrowed into the soft ground.

Crayden, jarred but unhurt, crawled out of the confused tangle of the control cabin and checked the dials. *Air 68, Nitro; 21, Oxy. Water normal.*

At that, he smiled for the first time since the ship had conked out; things looked different all of a sudden. This new place had *possibilities*, he saw now. And any place with possibilities beckoned to a born opportunist like Crayden.

He climbed out of the ship and smelled the warm air, and shook his head happily. *I'll make the most of it*, he told himself. If Fate wanted to kick him in the teeth again, that was O.K. He'd bull his

way through it. If he was stuck here—and the way the ship looked, he was—then he'd have a good time of it.

He looked around. It was almost a perfect Earth-type planet, probably uninhabited, not listed on any of the charts in his stolen ship, and it was a nice cozy place for him to stay. Things could have been worse, Crayden thought. There'd be hunting and fishing, he hoped, and he'd build a small cabin near a waterfall. *I'll make out*, he said, as if in defiance of whatever Power had let him escape from one prison and then had thrown him immediately into another.

He had left so quickly that he hadn't taken anything from his prison-barracks on Kandoris. He returned to the ship, and a quick check revealed a thought-converter, somewhat jarred by the crash, and a rescue-beam radiator. No weapons were to be found.

That didn't stop him. I'll make a bow and arrow, he decided. I'll go real primitive.

He tucked the damaged thought-converter under one arm, the rescue-beam radiator under another, and climbed out.

*The patrol won't ever use that one again*, he thought as he looked at the wrecked

cruiser. Its nose was buried in ten feet of mud at the side of a lake, and the ship was bent almost in half. The tail jets were all but ruined.

*I'm here for good*, he decided. *But it's going to be a picnic. It better be.*

He turned to survey the little world.

The gravity was about the same as that of Kandoris, which meant Earth-normal. He found that out as soon as he took his first step. He had expected to go sailing twenty feet, but he moved only the Earth-type two or three feet at a stride. That meant unusual density, heavy mass, since the little planet's diameter couldn't have been much over 700 miles. He had landed on a freak world. He scanned it some more.

But it didn't look like a freak. It might have been a lost corner of Earth. The sky was just a shade off-blue, and the sun was a trifle reddish, but the soil was brown, the grass was green, and the air was fresh, clean, and good to breathe. He was standing in a valley, by the side of a long, deep-looking blue lake. Small mountains, almost hills, hemmed in the valley, and heavy clusters of trees sprouted on the hills. A little stream wound down out of the near-

est hill and trickled into the lake.

Crayden felt a warm glow. In a way, this was the best thing that could have happened. Instead of going back to the old con games, the shabby routines he'd lived on, he'd have a new, fresh life beginning. He grinned. It was a talent he had, making the most of what seemed like a rough break. It was the way to stay alive.

He started off to follow the stream. After walking a few steps, he stopped.

"I name this planet Crayden," he shouted. "I take possession of it in the name of Steve Crayden."

"Crayden," came back the faint echo from the hill.

The effect pleased him. "I hereby proclaim myself King Stephen of Crayden!"

The echo replied, "Of Crayden."

Thoroughly satisfied, the new king began to trudge along the side of the stream, carrying the damaged thought-converter under one arm, the rescue-beam radiator under the other.

He followed the stream several hundred meters up into the hills. Looking ahead, he noted what seemed to be a thin trail of smoke curling into the sky. Natives?

He stopped and watched the smoke. The first thought that came to him was to hang back cautiously, but then he shook his head and kept moving. This was his world, and he was going to keep the upper hand.

They saw him first, though, and before he was aware of anything, ten blue-skinned men had stepped out of the woods and were kneeling at his feet.

"Kejwa!" they shouted. "Kejwa, Kejwa!"

Crayden was too startled to react. He stood there frozen, staring down. They were all burly humanoids, perfectly manlike as far as he could tell, except for the bright blue skin. They were clad in loin-cloths and beads, and were obviously friendly. Crayden relaxed; King Stephen had found his subjects.

Gingerly he touched the nearest native with the tip of his toe. The alien sprang up instantly and faced him. The man was well over six feet tall, and powerfully built.

"Kejwa endrak jennisij Kejwa," the native jabbered, pointing to the smoke that indicated the village.

"Kejwa! Kejwa!" came the chorus from the ground.

"I wish I could understand

you chaps," Crayden said. "Kejwa, eh? That's the best compliment I've had since the warden said I looked like an honest man."

They were dancing around him, stamping on the ground and clapping their hands, and emitting cries of "Kejwa! Kejwa!" until the trees began to tremble from the noise. Other blue-skins began to appear from further upstream, naked children and women in loincloths. They gathered around Crayden, chanting that one word over and over, now softly, now at the top of their lungs.

Crayden grinned at them. This was working out better than he'd dare dream. Slowly, with all the dignity his new rank afforded, Crayden began to move upstream toward the village, clutching the useless thought-converter like a scepter in his outstretched right hand.

When they reached the village, a tall, wrinkled native wearing a great many beads and a flowing white beard stood in front of the community fire, watching Crayden's approach. The beard looked strange against the blueness of the old man's chest.

As Crayden drew near, the old one sank down on both knees. "Kejwa," he said slow-

ly, in a very deep, solemn voice.

Crayden took the cue. He stepped forward and touched the old man on the left shoulder with the tip of his thought-converter. The oldster rose as if transfigured.

The villagers clustered around, keeping a respectful distance, and chattered away. He pointed to the thought-converter. "I'll have this fixed soon," he promised. "Then I'll be able to talk to you."

They continued to chatter. Every third word seemed to be "Kejwa." Crayden happily wondered whether it meant "king" or "god."

They installed him in a large hut, the best in the village. The old man took him there personally—Crayden decided he was either the chief or the high priest, or, most likely, both—and indicated a bed of thick grass in one corner. It was the only furniture.

"Thanks, pop," he said lightly. "Usually I expect better accommodations in my hotels, but I won't kick. See that the bellhop comes when I ring, will you? I hate having to wait."

The old man looked at him without a trace of comprehension or anything else but worship in his eyes.

"Kejwa emeredis calowa Kejwa," he said.

Crayden watched him depart, and sat for a while on the big stone at the entrance to his hut. From time to time little groups of children would approach timidly and stare at him and back away, and occasionally one of the blue-skinned women would come by. There hadn't been any women on Kandoris. Crayden rubbed his chin. Even a blue-skinned one would do right now, he thought. Yes, even she would be welcome.

He stared at the bare hut, with its low bed. The only other things in it were the thought-converter and the rescue-beam radiator. He hefted the compact rescue-beam radiator in his hand.

*I'd better get rid of this*, he thought. One of the natives might accidentally turn it on and call down the patrol.

He walked to the stream, held the radiator reflectively for a moment, and then pitched it into the water.

"Good riddance," he said. His last link with Kandoris and the worlds of the galaxy was gone. They couldn't find him unless he tipped them off by using the rescue-beam radiator, which would attract any patrol ship within a dozen light-years. And the radiator

was under the flowing waters of the stream.

When he returned to his hut he looked at the remaining piece of equipment, the thought-converter. "I'll really be able to make this tribe jump once I can talk to them," he said. "Women, food, fancy furniture—I'll just have to ask for them, and they'll jump. They wouldn't want their Kejwa to be displeased."

The thought-converter didn't seem to be too badly damaged. A few delicate wires had come out of their sockets, that was all. He tried to put them back, but his fingers were too thick and clumsy, and he had to give up.

He realized he hadn't slept in almost three days. He put the converter in his prison shirt, wrapping it carefully to protect it from the moisture of the ground, and curled up on the bed of grass. It wasn't much better than lying on the ground, but he was too tired to notice.

For the next three days he did nothing but sit on the stone outside the hut and toy with the thought-converter, while the natives brought him food three times a day. He didn't recognize any of the delicacies they brought—something which looked like

a black apple and tasted like a red one, another something which looked like nothing he'd ever seen on Earth and tasted like a shot of bourbon filtered into a banana, and plenty of fresh, red, rare meat, almost raw despite the perfunctory roasting they gave it.

Crayden felt his frame expanding, and, though he had no mirror, he knew the prison-planet pallor had left his face. This planet was agreeing with him, all right. Being Kejwa was a grand life. He'd never had it so good.

When he got tired of sitting and being worshipped, he decided to survey the area. He was curious about this world—*his* world—and he wanted to know all about it.

All the huts were something like his, only smaller, and the ones near the stream seemed to belong to the more important people of the tribe. The huts were arranged in a roughly semi-circular fashion, with the community fire at the entrance to the semicircle. All around was the thick forest. Nature's fortress.

Crayden wandered off toward the forest, hoping to see some of the native wild-life in action, but was surprised to find himself confronted by a little ring of blue-skins.

"Kejwa," they murmured,

pointing to the forest. "Nek nek konna Je Kejwa."

"My country, 'tis of thee," he replied gravely, and continued to move toward the forest.

They became more insistent. Two of the biggest stood in front of him and barred his way. "Nek nek konna Je Kejwa," they repeated more loudly.

Obviously they didn't want him straying. So his powers were limited after all. He frowned. "If that's the way you want it, I'll give in. Never argue with the boys in blue, the saying goes." But he was angry all the same.

Every night they danced in front of his hut, and every day they let him sit there while they came by and bowed and mumbled "Kejwa." But Crayden was getting restless.

They treated him as a king, or as a god, and he took full advantage of the privilege the way he did of everything else—but he was required to stay in the vicinity. The constant worship was starting to bore him, and the steady diet of rich food combined with lack of exercise had put a definite bulge around his stomach. He felt like a prize bull being groomed for the cattle show, and he didn't like it. He de-

cided the quickest way to fix things was to repair the thought-converter and talk to them.

But he couldn't do it himself. The repairs involved nothing more complex than putting three wires back in place, but he couldn't fit his fingers through the opening to do it. He tried improvising tweezers out of two twigs, but that didn't do it. He needed someone with small fingers—a child, perhaps. Or a woman.

A woman. Here was where his Kejwahood was going to come in handy.

One night as the tribe was gathered outside his hut he raised the thought-converter high over his head as a sign for silence. "Hold everything!" he thundered. "As your Kejwa, I declare this morsel strikes my fancy."

He pointed at a girl whom he'd noticed before—she seemed to be about seventeen or eighteen by Earthly standards, and she wore her loin-cloth with the dignity of a matron displaying a mink. Some large precious-looking stone was strung on a necklace and dangled down between her breasts.

She was the best of the lot. Craydon pointed to her, then to his hut—an unmistakable gesture.

The girl flashed a glance at the old man. He nodded benignly, stroked his great beard, and smiled as she stepped forward shyly and stood before Crayden.

"You'll do," he said approvingly. "A dish fit for a Kejwa." He waved dismissal to the tribespeople and took her inside the hut.

During the night he looked out the open entrance and saw a knot of tribespeople staring in with evident curiosity, but he didn't let that disturb him.

She seemed happy with the arrangement, and so did he. The blue skin didn't trouble him at all. He had come to think of himself as the white-skinned freak among the normal people. It had been three long years on Kandoris since Crayden had had a woman, but he hadn't forgotten anything. And this one knew all the tricks.

The people began to bring him dead animals—strange-looking beasts, resembling Earthly ones but with differences—and left them outside his door, as sacrifices. One morning there was a squirrel with horns; the next, a fox with a prehensile tail.

Whenever he walked through the village, they followed him, always at a re-



spectful distance, and soft cries of "Kejwa" drifted through the air. His woman—he named her Winnie, after a girl he'd once known on Venus—was getting the same treatment. She had become someone important now that she belonged to the Kejwa.

He spent a full day trying to get her to fix the thought-converter. Her fingers were slim and tapering, and would fit into the opening easily. But it wasn't simple to convey to her what he wanted her to do. After hours of gesturing and indicating what he wanted, she still didn't grasp it. Laboriously he went through it again. She looked up at him imploringly, and seemed ready to break into tears.

"Look, Winnie. For the last time. Just pick up these little wires and put them in here." He showed her. "If you only understood English—"

He showed her again. She still did nothing. He slapped her, hard, and left her in a little whimpering heap in a corner of the hut. He strode angrily out and stalked around the village. He wasn't going to be stymied here, not when he got past every other hurdle so well.

When he returned, night had fallen, and she was waiting for him, holding the

thought-converter. She had a bright little smile, and seemed to have forgotten all about the slap. He looked at the thought-converter. The wires were in place. The Crayden luck was holding true to form.

He kissed her, and she responded as he had taught her. After a while, he picked up the thought-converter and held it fondly.

"Kejwa," she said.

This was his chance to find out, he thought. He reached underneath and snapped on the converter.

Her lips formed the word "Kejwa" again.

But through the converter came a stream of unexpected concepts. "Placator of the gods . . . noble intervener . . . royal sacrifice."

"*Sacrifice?* What? When?"

She launched into a string of words, and the converter brought them over all too clearly. "Tomorrow is the day you go to the gods, and I should be happy. But I'm sad. I'll miss you."

"You mean the Kejwa gets *killed?*" he asked desperately.

"Oh, no," the converter translated. "Not killed. You go to meet the gods, to intervene in our favor. One of us is chosen every year; this year you came to us from above, and it was good."

"Where do these gods live?"

She pointed. "Down there. At the bottom of the lake. It is deep. We have never been able to reach the bottom."

Crayden's insides jangled. Royal sacrifice? Bottomless lake? So *that* was the catch?

The Crayden luck was just about being stretched to the breaking-point. For a second his old optimism asserted himself, and he told himself confidently that now that the converter worked he'd be able to talk the natives out of sacrificing him.

But the bleak truth was apparent, and for the first time in his life Crayden saw there was no opportunity he could cling to. Except—except—

He looked out the door of the hut. The night was black. He tiptoed out, softly. "Keep quiet," he told her.

He crept through the sleeping village to the stream where he had so boldly disposed of the rescue-beam radiator the other day. He hadn't needed it, then, but he did now. If he could find it, he could call the Patrol and get taken back to the prison planet, where he could start all over. He'd break out again;

he was sure. For Steve Crayden, optimism was an incurable disease.

Grimly calling on whoever had been taking care of him up till then, he got down on his knees in the water and began to grope frantically for the rescue-beam radiator he'd thrown—who knew where?—somewhere in the stream.

He moved inch-by-inch over the shallow bed of the stream, searching fruitlessly. He refused to give up. The cool waters of the stream washed the feverish sweat from his body and left him chilled and shivering.

When the aliens came for him the next morning, he was a hundred yards upstream, blindly rooting up handfuls of mud, still confident he was going to find the rescue-beam. It wasn't till the priest held him poised above the sparkling blue waters of the bottomless lake and started to release him, as a glad cry went up from the watchers—it wasn't until then that he came to the final realization that there were no angles left for him.

But he was still expecting a last-minute miracle as he hit the water. This time, there wasn't any.

THE END

*What will our relationship be with races on other planets with whom we may be thrown in contact during the space age to come? Will we—in blind narrowness—consider them our inferiors regardless of their talents and abilities? Will our arrogance be our undoing? Will the Terran say to those of other worlds: Stay out of my culture—Stay off my planet—*

# STAY OUT OF MY GRAVE

By RALPH BURKE

ROI had the robots dig two graves that morning, even though business was pretty quiet on Earth. No burial party had landed on the galaxy's graveyard planet in two days, and none was due until day after next or later, but it was good to be prepared, Roi thought.

"Good job," he said to the robots, after he inspected the clean, fresh-smelling graves. He nodded dismissal and they slid off into nowhere to await their next task. Breathing deeply, happily sucking in the spring air, Roi headed back to his cabin.

It was a good way to make a living—caretaker to a planet of tombstones. Earth, long since abandoned by the universe as a place to live, was still sentimentally re-

vered as the birthplace of humanity—and as its graveyard.

The great window which formed the west wall of his cabin had just been dusted a few minutes before, Roi noted; the impress of the dusting robot was deep in his carpet. "I'll have to remember that," he told himself. "It needs new treads."

He stared through the window at the rolling hills of Earth, at the sweeping green meadows and at the vaulting trees of the forest at the top of the hill, and at the even, beautiful rows of white grave markers which spread out over the land as far as eye could see.

Then: *Bzzz!*

The noise of the visiphone cut unexpectedly into Roi's

peaceful reverie. He flipped it on, and a solido-projection of Ennray, Roi's second-in-command, stepped into the room and sat down.

"Good to see you again, Ennray," Roi said to the solido. "What brings you to this part of the world?"

"Trouble, Roi. Big trouble brewing." The assistant looked troubled.

Roi pulled in a sharp breath. He'd been fearing trouble for years; things were just too easy.

"What happened? One of your latest consignment of bodies refuse to lie down?"

"Almost as bad, Roi," Ennray said, grinning. "Get this: a party of Llanishai landed in my sector this morning!"

"Oh? Is that all?" Roi was relieved. "They're nice people, those Llanishai. Some tourists came by and visited me a couple of years back—maybe these are the same ones. They were curious about Earth. It's where all their former patients are planted. I hope you're treating them with courtesy, old man."

Ennray's face became even more agitated. "You don't understand, Roi. I haven't told you what's wrong, yet. These Llanishai—one of them is *dead*. And they want to

bury her here. An alien, burying on Earth!"

Roi felt his stomach start to react. *Trouble indeed*, he thought broodingly. *Big trouble*.

"What did you tell them?" he asked.

"Nothing. You know I don't dare make a high-policy decision like that myself. I told them I'd call the Head Caretaker and find out what he thought about the situation. So I'm calling you. What do you think?"

Roi frowned. It had been so nice, so easy just a minute ago. "I don't know what to say, Ennray. There's no precedent for burying aliens on Earth—we've only buried humanoids so far. I don't quite know how we're going to get around it."

"Could you give me some kind of suggestion?" Ennray pleaded.

"Better send them to me. I'll take it out of your hands altogether and worry about it here," Roi said, feeling very noble about it. "Thanks for letting me know."

The solido of Ennray stood up. "Thank *you*, Chief. I was afraid you might throw it right back at me. And you know how I hate making important decisions like that."

Roi stared at the younger



Could they rest together even in death?

man, smiling. "Yes, Ennray. I know. Now see to it that these Llanishai get here quickly. Good night, Ennray."

"Good night, sir." The solido slowly faded into the air.

*Big trouble is right*, Roi repeated uneasily, as his chair came up to him and gently enfolded him in its plushness. But he wasn't too unhappy about it. I've had the job more than a century, he thought, and I suppose I'm overdue for some real trouble. Hasn't been any, unless you count that business with the Denebians forty years ago, and even that wasn't much.

He sat back. Llanishai coming here for burial, eh? That would be the first non-humanoid to rest in Terran soil.

He frowned anxiously, deliberating with himself. Finally he decided to pass the buck just as Ennray had done. *I don't have the authority to bury that alien myself.*

Roi reached for the visiphone and snapped it on. "Sirius IV, please. Office of the Galactic President."

After a moment, the solido of a young Sirian girl seated behind a desk came into Roi's room; smiling sweetly.

"I want to speak to President Horke, please," Roi said.

"Emergency. The name is Roi Anderon. I'm the Head Caretaker on Earth."

"I'm sorry, sir," the girl replied crisply. "The President is not on Sirius IV. He's had a death in his family, and left for Earth yesterday to supervise the burial."

*For Earth?* He was coming here? Now we'll see some fun, Roi thought. What with Horke and those Llanishai here at the same time, the decision was squarely in the President's lap—Roi hoped.

"Thank you," he said vaguely, and hung up.

He sat staring out the big picture-window, thinking. What if the President refused to act? What if he made trouble? What if the whole tangled situation cost Roi his job, and at his age he had to go combing the Galaxy for another?

He rocked slowly back and forth, whistling joylessly, wondering who would reach him first — President Horke or the party of Llanishai.

It was the Llanishai. They made it across Earth from Ennray's sector in what must have been record time. Roi was still staring out his window when the Llanishai ship dropped into sight, spiralled down, and came to a neat landing five feet above the

ground. It hung there, and the door opened. Four Llanishai came delicately down the ladder which emerged through the door. They walked carefully through the rows of graves to Roi's cabin.

Roi watched them curiously. The one in the front was the tallest, standing about four feet high or so, and the three others were progressively shorter. Roi watched with keen interest, marveling at the uncanny way the three legs of each Llanishai were coordinated for walking.

He went to the door and waved welcome. They returned the gesture.

"Come in," he said, with an air of joviality that he did not feel at the moment. "I'm Roi, the Head Caretaker."

"Pleased to meet you," the first Llanishai said, in deep, solemn tones. "I am Jeremiah. This is my family—my wife Magdalena, my sons Elijah and Elisha. My mother was once named Lilith, but she has passed away and no longer has a name. She is in our ship—awaiting burial."

"I'm very sorry to hear of your loss," Roi ventured.

"She was happy to die in the gravitational field of Earth," Jeremiah said. The Llanishai extended his ten-

tacles lazily and stretched them. Roi stared at the myriad tentacle-branches, the complex network of muscle that made the Llanishai the best surgeons of the universe.

"Yes," Magdalena said. "She was a great student of the culture of ancient Earth, and some of her deep interest has been transmitted to my husband and myself. He and I have chosen our names from ancient Earth legends, in honor of the planet from which our friends spring."

*This is going to be tough,* Roi thought gloomily. *These people love Earth—and they will probably be kicked out.*

"Sit down," he said out loud. "Make yourselves comfortable. It's a long time since any Llanishai visitors came this way."

"No," Jeremiah said. "We prefer to stand. Anyway, we must leave soon—there are so few of us, and so many of your people we must help. We would like to hold the burial tomorrow, if possible."

"Oh, yes, the burial—" Roi began weakly.

"My mother was very happy that she died near Earth," Jeremiah said. "In view of her strong interest in the planet and its history, it's very appropriate that she'll be buried here."

"Yes, yes—of course," Roi said. He rubbed a wrinkled hand over his chin. "There's just one problem we have to deal with, though."

"What's that?" Jeremiah asked suspiciously.

Roi groped for some way to tell the aliens that people had special feelings about Earth and didn't want any Llanishai buried there, but before he could find any handle for beginning the visiphone buzzer sounded.

Grateful for the lucky interruption, Roi snapped it on. It was Ennray again.

"Just received word from the monitor station," he said. "President Horke's party is in orbit around Earth, and will be landing shortly."

Somehow Roi bundled the aliens back out to their ship and assigned a robot to take them on a round-the-planet tour of Earth, telling them to return the next day. They were puzzled at the sudden dismissal, but they were much too polite to protest.

President Horke and his family seemed to show up the moment the Llanishai were gone. Roi saw them coming across the field, but he was unsure of protocol; unable to decide whether he should wait for the President to

reach the cabin or go out to meet him, he opaqued his windows and decided to let the President take him by surprise.

"*Four people to see you,*" the door said.

"Let them in."

The door admitted the President and his party. They were dressed in green—Sirian mourning colors, Roi recalled, drawing on his knowledge of the differing customs of the Galaxy. In his vast experience he had buried Sirians, Cygnians, Capellans—name the star and he had planted some of its sons. No humanoid with Earth's red blood in his veins would turn down the chance to return to the source of all mankind for burial.

The President stood there, simply radiating strength. Like all colonists of the heavy fourth planet of Sirius, he was well over seven feet tall and proportionately broad. Next to him stood his wife, an amazon of similar proportions, and to their right and left stood their children—Kathlin Horke, a beautiful girl of eighteen or so who towered head and shoulders over Roi, and ten-year-old Irwn Horke, already big and muscular. They needed no introduction—the President's



family was the best-known in the universe.

"Greetings, Roi," President Horke said, in his famed booming bass voice. "I had hoped not to see you so soon under these circumstances."

Roi donned his favorite look of sympathy.

"I understand your family has suffered a loss, President Horke."

"Yes. My wife's father left us last week," the President said gravely. "Of course, he specified burial on Earth."

"Of course," Roi agreed.

The conversation drifted on disjointedly for a while. *Now*, Roi thought, after he had carefully steered the thread of talk away from the President's own sorrows.

"I called your office for some information, President Horke, but you had already left for Earth."

The deep eyes which hid the cares of the Galaxy lowered with interest. "What, Roi? What did you want to ask me?"

Roi licked his lips. "There's a family of Llanishai visiting Earth now. Four of them."

"I see," said the President. "Go on."

"Well, sir—they started out as five—but one of them died during the trip."

"That's too bad. Llanishai

are valuable friends of humanoidkind. I don't like losing any of them," the President said, deeply sympathetic.

"Very true, sir," Roi said quietly. "They'd like to bury their mother on Earth."

The President's eyes widened, and suddenly the sympathy vanished. "What? I hope you didn't allow it! It's sacrilege, Roi."

"I did nothing, sir. I tried to get in touch with you to find out what you think about it."

"Out of the question. Absolutely impossible. It can't be allowed," the President said firmly. "What would the voters think? Uh—Earth is the—uh—most sacred shrine of humanoidkind, the source from which all of us spring. And here it's to be defiled by *aliens*?"

*I was afraid of this*, Roi thought.

He licked his lips and said, "I don't agree with you, sir." The President stared in open-mouthed surprise. "I think we *should*, bury them here," Roi continued, astonished at his own outspokenness. "Earth isn't reserved for humanoids, sir. The Llanishai have been of great assistance to our race. Without their surgeons, many of us—per-

haps you yourself, sir—might not be alive today. Surely we can let them—”

“I have never known a day’s illness,” President Horke interrupted coldly. “If they bury an alien here, it will be an insult to every humanoid in the Galaxy. I cannot permit it.”

“Very well, sir,” Roi muttered, feeling a growing sense of anxiety. He’d heard the President’s opinion—but now the Llanishai were coming back in a few hours, and he’d have to tell them. It wasn’t going to be pleasant to face the little creatures.

The explaining process was long, slow, and painful.

“That’s the way it is, Jeremiah,” Roi concluded. “President Horke feels that it would be—ah—desecration to allow a non-humanoid body to rest in Earth soil.”

“I do not understand,” the little Llanishai said, curling and uncurling his tentacles. “Mother wanted to be buried here so badly. Please—let me speak to the President. I will make him understand.”

“No, Jeremiah,” Roi said patiently. “He represents twenty billion humanoid voters, and there are only a few million of you Llanishai. He can’t afford to insult all

those humanoids just for the sake of—of an alien.”

“But it is no insult,” Jeremiah protested. He picked up his smallest son and playfully twined his tentacles together with the boy’s. “We are citizens, just as any humanoids. We have the same rights—or do we? Oh, I wish *we* were many and you few,” Jeremiah said, suddenly despairing.

“Bury on Mars, Jeremiah. There’ll only be trouble for all of us if you insist on burying her here.” Roi clamped his lips together and paced up and down the cabin, wishing the whole thing had never happened.

“No, Roi,” Jeremiah said with determination. “For centuries the Llanishai have worked side by side with humanoids. We have devoted our whole medical skill to keeping humanoids from death. Certainly we’ve earned the right to share the Galaxy’s funeral planet,” he argued. “We’re people, just as the humanoids are.”

Roi got up and walked to the window, and looked out at the two fresh graves the robots had dug. It was as great a conflict as he had ever experienced—but it was over in a moment. He saw where his duty lay.

Turning, he smacked the palm of his hand with his fist.

"Jeremiah, you're right. There's no reason in the universe why you people should not be free to bury your dead on Earth. We'll have to force Horke to see that he's wrong."

"No—not force," Jeremiah said mildly. "The Llanishai do not believe in compulsion. Let us go to him and talk peacefully, and point out how he is wrong."

Roi shook his head. "I know these people, Jeremiah. That method won't ever work. I'll think of something." Trembling with indignation, he turned away, trying to produce a plan.

"*One man to see you,*" the door said.

"Let him in."

It was President Horke. The big man looked weary and sad.

Roi didn't give him a chance to say anything. "Is your decision final?" he asked. "About those Llanishai, sir?"

The President ignored the question. "Where are they?"

"The Llanishai?"

"Yes. Where are they?"

"In their ship. They're waiting to bury—"

"Get them quickly," President Horke snapped. "Irwn is

seriously ill. I need a doctor."

"What's wrong, sir?"

"I don't know. He's unconscious, barely breathing. Probably some virus that he picked up on Earth. Send a Llanishai right over to my ship—it's an emergency."

Roi looked long and hard at the President, and a germ of an idea sprouted in his mind. It was unethical, of course, but the situation didn't call for ethics. He wondered—

"Yes, sir," he said at last. "I'll speak to the Llanishai right now and have one come over to treat your son."

"Thanks, Roi. We're very worried."

The President left and headed back to his ship. Roi wandered up and down in his cabin, ignoring the chair which pursued him and tried to make him sit down. He balanced everything very carefully in his mind—the Llanishai asking for permission to bury on Earth, the President refusing pompously in the name of humanoid-kind. It wasn't right. The Llanishai had as much right to bury on Earth as the most humanoid of humanoids.

Roi looked out the big window at the long rows of grave markers, and at the two

empty graves, newly dug. *They'll be filled soon enough*, he thought happily.

As quickly as his legs would take him Roi headed for the President's ship. The anxious face of the President's wife peered out to see who was outside.

"Come in," she said, lowering the ladder.

President Horke appeared from somewhere within the ship. His face was grave.

"They won't come," Roi said flatly.

"What? That violates their medical code!"

"I told them that. They refuse to come unless you let them bury their dead one here."

"But that'll destroy Earth's value as a shrine!" the President sputtered. "Once you open it for one alien body, they'll all want to be buried here!"

"Precisely," Roi said, beginning to enjoy the President's discomfort. "Jeremiah wants to set a precedent for his people. And this is the only way he knows of doing it."

"But what would the Galaxy say if they heard—"

The President's wife then turned to him. "Let them bury here, Edmund." Her voice was almost as deep as her hus-

band's. "What difference does it make? The Llanishai are almost like people, anyway. And if they won't help Irwn unless you do—"

"It's blackmail!" the President roared. "Those little beasts are blackmailing me!"

"But, Edmund—"

"It isn't for myself I'm against them. I like the Llanishai. But if the voters found out—some of them are so stuffy about Llanishai equality. And blackmail—the beasts!"

"Those little beasts can save your son's life," Roi said gently.

"All right, all right," Horke said angrily. "Tell them they can bury their corpse on Earth. But—"

Whatever else the President said went unheard. Roi turned and headed off across the field to the Llanishai ship, humming gently to himself.

A little later, Jeremiah went quickly and politely to the President's ship, flexing and unflexing his tentacles. The President's wife led him into her son's cabin and stood behind the little Llanishai.

"I prefer to work alone, Mrs. Horke," he said in a soft voice. She looked at him nervously, and left.

He came out a few minutes

later. The boy was walking happily behind him.

"A simple case," he said casually. "Very simple, President Horke. Really nothing to worry about. I merely had to enter the left lung to eliminate some congestion. And we Llanishai are constructed so well for operations of that sort." Jeremiah held out his tentacles and indicated the hairlike branches at the ends.

"It was only luck that there were Llanishai on the planet when this happened," Roi said. "There's no telling what might have happened if we only had just the six caretakers here."

"We're very grateful to you," Mrs. Horke said to Jeremiah.

Jeremiah looked up at her face, hanging in the air three feet above his own. "There is no need for gratitude, Mrs. Horke. This is the function of the Llanishai—this is why we live. To serve the universe. I could no more have denied my medical skill from your son than could I have cut off a tentacle."

"*Liar! Then why did you blackmail us?*" said President Horke fiercely.

"Pardon me," Jeremiah said meekly. "I don't believe I heard you correctly."

"I said blackmail!"

Roi paled. This was what he dreaded—now the whole thing was going to explode in his face!

"Would you mind explaining, President Horke?" the little surgeon said, putting his tentacles on his hip-sockets in very humanoid fashion.

"Roi told us all about it, so don't play innocent. How you wouldn't operate on Irwn unless we gave you permission to bury your mother on Earth."

The Llanishai recoiled as if struck. "I don't believe this. Why, what you're saying is—is untrue! To accuse a Llanishai of violating his code for personal advantage is unbelievable."

Roi felt sweat pouring down his body. "Just a minute, Jeremiah," he said hesitantly. "I'll explain."

"There is no need to explain," Jeremiah snapped. "I must leave now. My wife and I have decided to bury my mother elsewhere. We fear her body might become contaminated, lying in this planet's unworthy soil!"

With great dignity the Llanishai turned and marched out. He had made up his mind.

The President and Roi followed Jeremiah across the

field, Roi practically dragging the big man along.

"I can explain everything," he said desperately to the outraged Horke. "All I wanted to do was make you realize that the voters aren't the highest law. You know deep down that those Llanishai deserve equality in all things. For hundreds of years they've been faithful friends to humanoidkind, and now you're refusing to recognize them as beings worth as much as you are. I don't know," Roi said. "Maybe I've gotten out of touch with humanoidkind, living on this abandoned stellar boneyard. But it seems to me that the President of the Galaxy would realize things like this."

They reached the Llanishai ship. President Horke remained stonily silent.

"I'm sorry I had to use force to make you give permission, sir, but you never would have listened if I hadn't taken things into my own hands. If you only hadn't given the show away, everything would be all right. Suppose the Llanishai did refuse to treat your son? He might be dead now."

"I know," Horke grunted. "Let's go in."

"Jeremiah!" Roi called. "We want to talk to you."

"Go away," came a gruff voice from the interior of the ship. "We're packing."

"No, come out!"

Jeremiah appeared. The Llanishai was agitated, and his tentacles moved back and forth frantically.

"Go ahead," Roi urged. "Tell him you were wrong. Be noble."

It was obviously hard for Horke, but Roi could see that the big man sensed the unfairness of the situation at last. "In the name of humanoidkind," the President said after some hesitation, "I wish to apologize. Henceforth there shall be no distinction between humanoid and Llanishai," he proclaimed pompously. "I'll see to it when I get back to the Capital."

"Go away. We're leaving for Mars so I can bury my mother."

Roi chewed at his lips. Now he had a new problem—he had to win back Jeremiah's respect.

"Your mother should be buried on Earth," the President said. "As a symbol of unity for all time to come."

"Just a minute ago I was a liar and a blackmailer," the puzzled Llanishai said.

"That was my doing," said Roi. "I lied—in a good cause."

I was the one who made up the story that you wouldn't come unless your request was granted."

"But that was not right!" the Llanishai said.

"That's something *you* have to learn," Roi said. "Sometimes you have to do things that are not right, in order to achieve a higher end."

"Just as I learned something too," the President said.

"You'll probably see to it that this whole affair is covered up so it doesn't cost you votes," Jeremiah said glumly.

"No, Jeremiah," said the President. "I've learned."

"We've all learned," Roi said. He wiped his forehead; it had been a rough ten minutes.

"I've learned—not to trust anybody," said Jeremiah.

"You'll probably get votes out of this some way."

"Trust us," said Roi. He looked at Horke, who was sweating also.

Jeremiah's eyes traveled slowly from one face to the other. "All right," he agreed. "I'll trust you. Our peoples shall be friends."

He placed one finely-mus-cled tentacle in Roi's hand, and one in Horke's. "We have all misunderstood."

"But now misunderstand-ings are over," Horke said. "The voters will have to learn too."

"May we bury your moth-er?" Roi asked.

"It will make me very happy," said Jeremiah, smil-ing.

Roi gave the signal, and the robots entered the ship to prepare for the burial.

**THE END**



*The thieves of Vanamon stole the darndest things! Toothpaste and transistors; furnaces, fox furs. And if a dynamo was too heavy to move, they stole the blueprints and made one themselves. So Kemar had to set a pretty fantastic trap in order to—*

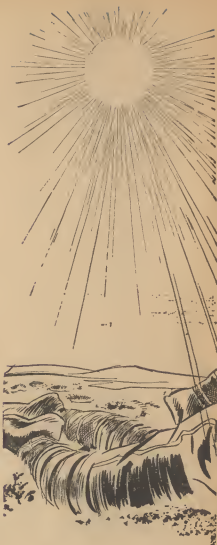
# CATCH A THIEF

By GORDON AGHILL

THERE she is, Kemar thought. *There's my thief.* He watched the sturdy-looking redhead as she crossed the plaza, walking at a brisk pace. Idly, he studied the play of the muscles along her long, bare legs. Nice calves, he thought.

*There's my thief,* he thought again, with a touch of triumph. Mixed with the triumph, though, was a strange, disturbing tinge of sadness at the thought of turning her in.

Alaina was no more than twenty-two or twenty-three, Kemar hazarded, and she looked much too pretty to be what he knew she was: the most successful thief the Van-



Was it a mocking





apparition promising life but foreshadowing death?

amon Crime Corps had yet encountered. And that was saying quite a bit, considering the swarms of thieves that infested Vanamon these days covering the place.

Without allowing himself to feel any excitement about the beginning of the end of the hunt, Kemar swung himself up from his bench and began to stroll along after the girl. It was, after all, just another day's work, he tried to tell himself. Even if she were both the shrewdest and the prettiest operator Kemar had yet seen.

He had been watching her for almost a month. The Corps had spotted her almost immediately upon her arrival at Mindor City. She met all the requirements for a priority-A suspect: she was young, capable, vague about her background, and a complete stranger in town. And there was something else about her, something that was intangible, that told Kemar she was a thief.

The trouble was they had nothing definite on her. Kemar had been assigned to watch her closely, and he'd carried out the assignment joyfully, keeping a careful check on her activities; becoming friendly with her; even dating her two or three times. It had been far

from the least pleasant case he'd been on.

He looked at her trim figure as she hurried along ahead of him. I almost wish it weren't true, he thought, half-bitterly. If only she weren't a thief—

The thieves constituted Vanamon's major crime problem. They came from nowhere and vanished quickly, taking with them, not jewels or banknotes, but products of Vanamon technology. They disappeared into space, presumably to market their loot on the outworlds. The people of Vanamon didn't know. They had as little to do with the outworlds as possible.

It is particularly bad, thought Kemar, when you hate the thieves as much as I do, yet love this particular thief as much as I.

She was carrying a parcel under her arm, probably containing books. The thieves had given up taking actual physical objects now, preferring simply to steal books that explained fundamentals. It was much more efficient, really. When the thieves had first descended on Vanamon, they had lifted everything not tied down — refrigerators and transistors, furnaces and toothpaste tins. Nothing was either too big or too insignifi-

cant to be taken. Some of the thieves caught by the Crime Corps had been found with incredible assortments of Vanamon products.

But now they took books and blueprints, instead—with one exception. The one item of solid merchandise that the thieves still went after, and went after fiercely, was spaceships. It did them no good to copy the complex vessels; they wanted the real things, and quickly. They never missed a chance to grab one when the opportunity showed up.

*And that, thought Kemas, is how I'm going to catch Alaina.*

By the end of two weeks of careful observation, he had been sure she was a thief, and a good one. He still had come up with nothing more conclusive than that look in her eyes, but to him that was enough. It did not, unfortunately, constitute sufficient evidence to convince Danrik, the chief of the Crime Corps. He would not agree.

"I think we're going to transfer you," Danrik had told him. "That girl you're watching is no more of a thief than I am. You're too valuable to be wasting all this time running up dead ends."

"I don't believe it's soon enough to tell about her," said

Kemas. "Give me a little more time, will you, sir?"

Danrik's eyes twinkled. "You're not mixing business with pleasure, are you?"

Kemas looked shocked. "Of course not, sir!"

So they gave him a little more time. He discovered he was working on both sides of the problem: he wanted desperately to prove to Danrik that the girl was a thief, and he wanted equally badly to prove to himself she wasn't. And he knew, beyond much doubt, that he'd never be able to conclude the latter. He was too good a detective not to know she was guilty; no matter how much he wanted her to be.

By the third week she was talking of leaving Vanamon, and that made Kemas even more certain she was a grade-A thief. There wasn't much travel between Vanamon and the outworlds, and anyone leaving the planet had some pretty good reason for it. Like having to carry away stolen goods.

He talked the matter over with his superiors, and suggested a plan to establish her guilt. It was simple. Bait her with something large and tempting, like a spaceship.

It was a standard Corps-

type saucer-model ship and Kemar watched with satisfaction as she drew near it. Putting it in her path had involved some masterly scheming, but she had followed along nicely. As he had guessed, the ship was too great a temptation to let go.

The spaceport was almost deserted. Kemar stepped around a small, rusting two-man job and spotted her heading across the field towards the saucer they had allowed her to grab.

He beckoned to a nearby attendant. "Come here, friend."

"What do you want?" the attendant began, in a tired but yet belligerent voice.

"Your help," Kemar snapped. He flashed his card. "That girl's a thief. She thinks she's going to take off for her home planet. I'm going to go into that ship after her. Get hold of a communicator in a hurry and get Danrik out here—the Corps chief."

Respect appeared in the other's eyes. "Right," he said, and scuttled away.

The port expediter came bustling out to find out what was going on. The spaceport was a pretty dead place, and apparently he was surprised to find an unscheduled flight leaving.

Kemar took a seat in the shadow of a hangar and watched in amusement as she produced her papers (the papers that had been so carefully prepared for her) and probably told the expediter that it was her private ship. Her lips were moving rapidly, but Kemar couldn't hear what she was saying.

He watched as the port expediter considered the whole thing. Finally the little man nodded and chugged back to the administration building.

*In a minute I'm going to have to arrest her,* Kemar thought. *I'm going to have to tell her I knew all along she was a thief. And I don't want to, dammit, I don't want to!*

The baggage trap clanged shut. The Expediter buzzed clearance from the dome. She climbed into the saucer. He waited until her legs disappeared within.

Now, he thought. He sprinted across the field, vaulted up the gangway just as it began retreating into the ship, and jumped inside.

"Hello, Alaina."

She turned, with no surprise on her face. "Hello, Kemar."

Then something smashed savagely into the back of his head.

"Sorry," she said.

"Sure," said Kemar. "I'll bet you've been weeping over my prostrate form ever since your boobytrap hit me." He looked up. She had found a small-size Corps uniform tucked away somewhere, and changed into it. She was a big girl, and the former owner of the uniform must have been a small man. It was a tight fit. The sight of her made his head hurt a little less.

"I had you pegged right, didn't I?" Kemar asked. "You are a thief, aren't you, Alaina?" It hurt him to say it.

She smiled prettily. "At your service. A full-fledged member of the Guild of Thieves, thank you."

He looked at her bitterly. "Very funny. Are we in space yet?"

"Heading for the Hannebrink system. Our home base is Hannebrink IV. I don't suppose you know anything about the place."

"Nothing," said Kemar dully. "Outworlds never interested me much." He sat back and rubbed his head. He thought of what Danrik would say, and the headache doubled.

Some detective. Instead of trapping the thief, he had been trapped himself. Alaina had made quite a haul: a spaceship and a genuine live

officer of the Vanamon Crime Corps. He wondered if they planned to hang his scalp on somebody's trophy-room wall.

"What are you going to do with me?"

"Nothing serious," Alaina said. "We'll return you to Vanamon in good time. Of all the useless things to grab, a Corpsman's about the most. We just don't want you," she grinned.

"That makes me happier. Mind if I get up?"

"I'd prefer it if you'd stay tied up for a while," she said. "I may be smarter than you are, but you're stronger than I am, and I don't trust you." She laughed gaily. "I never did, you know. Not even that night on the lake."

That cut him. *But what do you expect from a thief? Love?* I'm a fool, he told himself.

He slouched glumly against the side of the ship, feeling the coldness of the metal through his thin shirt.

He'd be the butt of the planet when he got back. Danrik would break him down to a beat patrolman just for a starter, and—

But at least he had been right about one thing. She *was* a thief, and a good one. Why, she had even managed to steal *him*!

After a while he tired of watching her bustle around the ship and he dozed off. His head still throbbed from Alaina's concealed club. He had been bashed *hard*.

A sudden shout awakened him. He looked up and saw Alaina cutting his bonds, and for the first time he noticed that her usual coolness was completely gone.

"We're out of control!" she managed to say.

"Huh? What's going on?"

"I got the ship into the atmosphere all right, but then something went wrong. I'm not too sure how these Vanamon models work—"

Kemar didn't wait to hear what else she had to say. He jumped up and raced across the ship to the control panel.

She had messed things up; that was certain. Quickly he unsnarled the misthrown levers and tried to level the saucer off before it hit, but there wasn't much else he could do. She had brought the ship into landing orbit fairly successfully, with one minor difficulty: the orbit she had computed was a collision course which would crack them headfirst into Hannebrink IV at a speed of a couple of hundred miles an hour. It wasn't going to be a good landing.

*Damned women drivers*, he snickered, frantically trying to compensate with the side jets. He eased the ship in as best he could, but it folded into the ground hard and threw him halfway across the cabin. He lay still, resting for a moment.

Then he got up and looked around for the girl. She was curled up at the other side of the saucer, unconscious but not visibly damaged. Kemar shook her a couple of times.

She awoke and smiled. "I guess I'm—I'm not much of a driver, am I?"

"No" he agreed. For a moment he managed to forget she was a thief; she was just a pretty girl crumpled into a corner of a ship. She stood up, shook herself, and stared quizzically at him. "What now?"

"Let's see where we hit," he suggested. Apparently they had struck on an angle. They made their way up the incline of the floor to the escape hatch, and Kemar pushed it open. A burst of heat swept in.

"Whew! You couldn't have picked a cooler place to crash, could you?"

The girl looked out and whistled softly. "Right in the middle of the Great Desert! I couldn't have fouled us up worse if I'd plotted the orbit deliberately to do it."

"How far are we from your base?"

"Devil only knows," she said. "This desert takes up pretty near a whole continent. We might be right in the middle, or near the edge."

He frowned. "Nice going. I'll check the drive."

He headed down to the drive section, noting as he went that the radio was smashed thoroughly and irreparably. That put a quick finish to one tentative plan of his—that of surreptitiously putting in a subradio message to Danrik on Vanamon to come fetch him.

He checked the drive as best he could and returned to the upper level of the ship in a few minutes.

"How is it?" she asked.

"Pretty bad. I don't even know how badly we squashed the jet tubes, but the drive itself needs some repairs anyway. We couldn't take off without a couple of days' work."

"Some kidnaper I am," she said brightly.

"Yeah."

He paused to wipe some sweat away. "It's awfully hot in here," he commented.

"Shouldn't it be?" she asked innocently. "The temperature out on the desert is at least 130. It ought to be

pretty hot in here, too, shouldn't it?"

"The temperature's a lot more than that when this ship's going through an atmosphere in a hurry, but it doesn't heat up in here. We have a cooling system in here for that. But I don't think it's working right."

She sniffed. "Smells funny, too."

He took a deep breath and nodded grimly. "I thought so. Escaping ammonia starting to creep out of the coils. We've wrecked the refrigeration system too. I suppose." He sat down again.

"What are we going to do?"

"Fry. If the fumes don't get us first. If we stay here, we'll be fried in no time. It'll be a little slower outside. Feel like walking?"

Gingerly he pushed open the escape hatch, coughing now from the increasing percentage of ammonia in the ship's atmosphere. He extended a leg over the ledge and crawled outside.

The heat hit him like a closed fist. It was *hot*. The skin of the ship was already warm from its few minutes' exposure to the sun.

He looked down and saw that the ship had ploughed neatly into the ground, and

was about half-buried in the soft sand.

He clambered down the side of the ship, made the final leap to the sands below, and held out his arms. "Jump."

He caught her easily as she fell, swung her to the ground.

"Nice view," he said.

There was a good-sized hill out near the horizon, and a couple of scraggy-looking outcrops of rock in between. But everything else was bright, yellow, hot sand. Yellow hung over the planet like a curtain.

"Any way of telling how far we are from civilization?"

"It's impossible to tell," Alaina said. "Our base is close to where the desert ends, but we don't know how far that is from here."

He looked down at his bare legs, and then at hers. "These briefs are fine for muggy weather," he said, "but they are lousy for deserts."

She shaded her eyes and stared off at the horizon. The native animals usually congregate at rockpiles like that one." She pointed to the small hill in the distance. "We might as well start walking toward it," she said. "Even if there are no natives there, maybe it'll have a shadow we can rest in."

"Native life? Dangerous?"

"No. Harmless old beasts."

They began to walk. The sand kicked up in little squishing clouds as they tramped. Kemar felt his skin start to blister.

"Some planet," he said bitterly.

But at least the crash had given him the upper hand again, such that it was. All things were equal now between them, and, since the one difference was his greater strength, he was in charge. And if they could only hold out until she led him to the thieves' headquarters, perhaps—perhaps—

Perhaps what? Bring the whole pack of them to justice? What about Alaina? What shall I do with her? She's a thief, like all the rest, he thought sourly.

"This didn't turn out so successful a trip, did it?" he asked. "You didn't expect it to finish this way at all."

She looked at him, and paused to wipe some of the sweat from her forehead. "You Vanamon will never understand us, will you? You'll always remain completely blind," she said calmly.

"Understand thieves? Pirates? No understanding is necessary," Kemar said angrily. "You people are parasites—the whole Guild of you." He laughed derisively.



"A guild of thieves! Whenever we discover something worthwhile, there's always a thief there to swipe and spread it around to the miserable out-worlds."

She shook her head. "You can't understand any of it, can you? I tried, once—the last time I was on Vanamon. But he didn't understand either."

Kemar suddenly grew jealous. "I don't want to hear anything about it. Let's drop the whole discussion. I—I almost loved you, once. Before I found out who you were."

"That was silly of you," she said coldly. "But you're right. Let's not argue here, shall we?" Suddenly she swayed and nearly fell against him. He reached out to steady her, feeling pleasure as his hand braced against the firm muscles of her back.

"Let's keep moving," he said.

"It's so hot," Alaina said weakly. "I just want—all of a sudden, I just want to lie down—"

"Let's keep moving," he said. At his touch, she seemed to draw on some inner resource and began to stride confidently. It lasted only a moment. Then she weakened again.

". . . so tired."

He squinted out into the distance at the outcrop. "Do you see something moving on that rock? Some sort of an animal? Could that be one of the kind you were talking about?"

"Mirage," she said wearily. But then she looked again. "No—yes—you're right! It is one!"

They began to walk with redoubled energy. As they drew closer Kemar saw that there was indeed some sort of animal on the rock—a long, green, many-legged creature, with a tiny, snail-like head. He felt a twinge of fear at the sight of the creature. They approached.

"Careful, Alaina," Kemar warned.

"No—it's all right. They're harmless." She struggled up the side of the little cliff where the animal rested. Halfway up she stumbled, fell against the burning rock, leaped up immediately with a cry of pain. Kemar followed her with difficulty; she seemed more agile than he.

When he reached the top, he saw she had fallen again and sprawled out directly in front of the creature. The alien was extending a queerly-shaped bottle toward her.

Alaina reached for it, but the effort of climbing the slope

had been too much for her in that heat. She collapsed.

"Alaina!" As Kēmar ran toward her he saw the alien reach down and trickle a few drops of liquid from the bottle onto her lips. She stirred a little and awoke.

"It's water," she said. She took the leathery bottle and handed it weakly to him. "Here. Take a drink."

He looked at it suspiciously, then glanced from her to the alien. He rubbed his dry lips together. Finally, he lifted the bottle and took a tentative swallow. It felt cool as it rolled down his throat. He took another sip, then another.

He looked into the alien's colorless little eyes. "Real water!"

"Yes," the alien said.

A wave of dizziness passed over Kēmar. He put a hand against the creature's body to steady himself.

"You both are ill," the thing said. "Come. I'll take you to my village."

"I'm all right," Kēmar said, shaking his head to clear it. He paused and blinked. "Your village?" Despite the fact that the kindly-seeming monster spoke his language and had brought them water in anticipation of their needs, Kēmar found it difficult to think of a

*village* inhabited by the odd-looking beasts.

"The girl," he said.

"Put her on my back."

It took every bit of strength Kēmar could muster to lift the girl from the blistering hot sand and sling her over the back of the alien.

"I'm afraid you will have to walk," said the alien, almost regretfully. "I could not possibly carry the two of you."

"All right. I'll manage."

The next hour and a half seemed like months to Kēmar. The brilliant glare of the sun, the hot sand that burned through the soles of his boots, and the scorching air that seared his lungs with every breath, all combined to make every step a major effort. Somewhere along the way, he passed out completely.

When he awoke, somebody was pouring water over his face. He turned his head and opened his eyes. The monster was leaning over him.

"Do you feel better now?" it asked.

Kēmar nodded. "A little." He looked around him. Apparently he was in a cave of some sort. A cool breeze blew steadily. "Where's Alaina?"

"We have put her on another cot in the next chamber of this cavern. Is it cool enough here?"

"It's a damn sight better than that desert of yours. Thanks."

"A nothing," said the monster, waving a tentacle. "By the way, I am called Rroo." He trilled the consonant oddly. "My friend, Ellae, who brought you here, said that you should look at the girl, perhaps. She appears to be very ill."

Kemar did a double-take. Having no way of telling one alien from another, he had assumed that this one was the same who had met them in the desert.

"I'll see her," Kemar said. He sat up in the cot. The skin on his face and legs felt stiff and dry, and he knew he was in for one devil of a sunburn. It pained already.

He followed Rroo through a door that had been cut in the solid rock to where Alaina lay on another cot.

She didn't look good at all.

The skin was already blistering where she had been exposed to the intense ultraviolet of Hannebrink IV's sun, and she was pale and clammy where the sun had not touched her. Kemar diagnosed it as heat exhaustion and second-degree sunburn.

"She'll need salt tablets," he said. He turned to Rroo. "Do you have any salt around?"

"Salt? I'm afraid I do not know the word."

"Sodium chloride. It's a chemical we need in our body processes."

The stalked eyes regarded him sadly. "I'm afraid we do not know much about the chemical terms in your language."

Kemar frowned. *Of course not*, he thought. What would these creatures know of chemistry anyway? "We'll have to get some from our ship, then. I'd be grateful if you'd lead me back."

Rroo swung his tiny head on his long neck in what was obviously a sign of negation. "I am afraid that's impossible just now. You are badly sunburned yourself, and another exposure on top of the first would only make yourself as sick as the girl is, and we would not know how to treat you. Either wait until you are ready to face the sun again, or tell me what it is you want from the ship and how it can be recognized, and I will send someone to get it."

Kemar didn't like it. There was no way of knowing what these things were up to. They seemed amiable enough, but he couldn't be sure. And, being from Vanamon, he had a basic distrust of any outworlder.

Still, there was nothing he could do. He hesitated for a moment longer and then nodded. "You can't miss it; it's in the medical kit. I'll probably need some of the other stuff in there, too. And tell whoever goes to make sure that the ammonia is all out of the ship; our refrigeration system broke down."

"Ammonia?" Roo's soft voice was questioning.

"Poisonous gas. It should all be gone now, but there's no need to take any chances."

"Very well. How will we recognize this medical kit?"

Kemar described the box and its location, and Roo bobbed his tiny head. "We will get it. And, if you will excuse me now, I must leave this cave. It is much too cold for me."

"All right. I'll watch Alaina."

When the alien had left, Kemar sat on the edge of the cot and stared at the girl.

Damn! Why did she have to be a thief? The only thing he could do was take her back to Vanamon as soon as he got the ship patched up. That is, is he could patch it up. According to what she had said, there was a group of thieves located somewhere up near the arctic circle of Hannebrink IV. If he could get

Alaina back home, the Crime Corps could find out where the thieves' base was from the girl, and raid their headquarters.

It took better than two hours to locate the medical kit. Kemar managed to get Alaina conscious enough to swallow two salt tablets, but she very obviously didn't know what was going on around her. She lay down and closed her eyes again as soon as she had washed down the salt.

Kemar took a pressure can out of the case and sprayed her blistered skin with burn medication. There was nothing else he could do immediately. Perhaps sleep would be the best healer after all.

He sprayed his own scorched hide and walked back into the next room to his cot. He felt as though he could sleep for a week, himself.

When he awakened, he saw two of the aliens standing over him. One of them held a bowl of some kind of soup with large chunks of meaty-looking substance floating in it.

"We brought you some food," said the soft voice. "We would like to ask you some questions when you have eaten."

The mixture smelled good, and tasted even better.

"Thanks, Rroo," he said when he had finished. Then he looked sharply at the alien. "You *are* Rroo, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am. And this is Ellae, who helped you in the desert."

"I'm sorry, I didn't—"

"There is no need to apologize," Ellae said, waving a tentacle in the air. "We find it difficult to tell humans apart as you do to distinguish between us."

"You said you wanted to ask some questions?" Kemas asked warily.

"Just for our own information, so that we may help you, if possible," Rroo said. "Where do you come from? Why did your ship crash? Who are you?"

"We would like to know," Ellae said.

Kemas took a deep breath. He simply couldn't tell them that Alaina was a criminal. They seemed to be honest, likable animals themselves, and he was not sure how they might react to such a revelation.

There was only one thing to do—lie.

"The woman is my wife," he said coolly. "We were just touring around—a sort of honeymoon trip. The drive conked out on us for some

reason, and we had to crash-land."

It was simple, and it covered the facts. It was a good lie, and Kemas was oddly proud of it. *I've become a very accomplished liar since meeting Alaina*, he thought.

"You have our sympathies," said Ellae. "Will it be possible to repair your ship?"

"I think so," Kemas replied. "It'll take several days of work, though. The circuits in the coordinate translator will have to be completely redone."

"If there is any way we can help—"

"I doubt it," he said. "Unless you can come up with some way of getting me back to my ship without getting sunburned. Then I can start making repairs. If there's anything—"

The alien hesitated in thought for a moment. "I think we might have something for you," he said. He disappeared into the back of the cave, and returned a few moments later clutching a large umbrella in his uppermost tentacle.

"I think this will be adequate," Ellae said.

Kemas looked at the alien, startled. "Where'd you get a thing like that?"

The alien gave a curious gesture, which might have

been a shoulder-shrug had he had shoulders, but declined to make any other reply. The question went unanswered.

One of the aliens—he didn't find out which, and didn't bother to ask—convoyed him back across the desert to the ship the next day, keeping him fairly well protected in the shade of the umbrella. The blisters had gone down, and he was beginning to feel comfortable again.

He arranged with the alien to be picked up again at the close of the day, and went inside the ship.

The air was hot and dry in there. The ammonia was no longer present, but the steady beating of the sun on the refrigerator-less ship had now turned the interior into a near-oven. It was as hot as the desert inside, without the benefit of the occasional desert breezes that wandered by.

He dragged out the repair kit and set patiently to work.

After a while, he began wondering. He had been too busy worrying over Alaina's condition and his own in the past days to seriously consider anything else. But—where would the aliens get an umbrella? What would they need one for?

And why did they build a

cave so cool they couldn't stay in it? Who was *that* for?

And they spoke his language. That meant there was fairly regular contact between the monsters and the human inhabitants of the planet—the Guild.

As he worked, he started to wonder just how big a fool he really was.

When the alien came back for him, Kemar was ready to start asking questions. Some rummaging in the ship had yielded a small needle gun, which he had slid into his boot, ready for use in case the beasts got nasty when he started asking for explanations.

He didn't say a word all the way back to the village. There was no need to get the alien stirred up while they were still in the desert. Kemar didn't relish the idea of being left alone in that dazzling, blistering waste.

As they approached the little cluster of stone houses where the monsters lived, Kemar narrowed his eyes against the glare in order to make out what it was that looked so oddly out of place.

Then he spotted it: a plane.

He jerked out the needle gun and aimed it at the beast's head.

"Where did that plane come from?" he asked harshly.

"I do not know for sure," the alien said, in its usual mild voice.

"Who are the pilots?"

"I dare say that they are human members of the Guild." There seemed to be a hidden note of humor in the soft voice.

"We're going to see what this is all about," Kemar said tightly. "And I warn you—if you do anything I don't like, I'll blow your brains out." The gun was aimed directly between the stalks of the creature's eyes.

This time, there was a definite chuckle in the alien's voice. "If you want to blow out my brains, then I do not suggest you point it at my eyes. You don't think an intelligent brain could be concealed in so small a space as that, do you?"

Kemar did not like to have his ignorance displayed. "Your eyes will go first, chum. Then I can fire a few more shots looking for your brain."

"Very well. Let's go." The creature didn't seem at all dismayed.

None of the other monsters in the village seemed to be paying any attention to Kemar as he entered. He forced the alien to go straight

to the cave entrance and open the heavy door. He moved quietly along the corridor and into the room where he had left Alaina. Two men were sitting in chairs next to the cot, talking to her.

"—he's really a wonderful guy," the girl was saying. "If we could only get him to take the broad view of it, he'd be a perfect agent for us."

One of the men nodded. "I am sure he would, but convincing him won't be an easy task. A Crime Corps man from Vanamon would have a typically Vanamese outlook. Stealing is bad. A man who discovers something has a right to keep it secret. These people just can't seem to think in Galactic terms."

"Half the planets in the Galaxy are that way," Alaina said bitterly.

"Against thieves?" Kemar asked harshly. "Yes, I rather think most decent people are."

They jerked their heads around to look at him as he stood in the doorway.

There was a strained silence, and then Alaina said, "Most decent people aren't, Kemar. I tried to tell you that once, but it didn't make any impression. You can't expect humanity to progress unless they share each other's knowl-

edge. Vanamon won't do that, and it's typical of the prevalent sort of planetary thinking. A person or a culture has a right to profit by an invention, not to keep it a secret—"

"Never mind," Kemar snapped. "You're all under arrest. I'm going to take the three of you to the ship and lock you up until I finish the repair work. Then we're going to go to Vanamon for trial."

Something hit his hand, and the needle gun went off, firing wide of its mark. Alaina had thrown a small bottle from the medical kit.

Kemar tried to aim the gun again, but before he could do anything, one of the men had leaped out of his chair and sent his body in a flying tackle at Kemar's knees.

Kemar sidestepped a little, but he still twisted around under the force of the blow. Then, unexpectedly, the alien reached out with a tentacle and grabbed his wrist. He tried to pull away, but the other of the two men snatched the needle gun out of his hand. He was caught.

"Sorry," Alaina said once again.

"You always apologize after you trip me up," Kemar said acidly.

She smiled. "I always feel so sad when I do, because it's

so easy," she said. "Your whole planet's like that. That's why we can whisk things in and out almost at will."

Kemar said nothing for a long while. Finally he said, "I take it you managed to get in contact with your two friends while I was gone, Alaina."

"No," said the alien. "That's my doing."

"Yours?"

"Of course," the monster said. "We know how badly our friends need your spaceships, and as soon as you began repairing your ship I sent for some Guild members to come get it. We fellow thieves must help each other out, you know."

Kemar blinked. "You're a thief too?"

"I am a member of the Guild, yes."

Kemar shook his head. "I give up. The whole universe is rotten, planet by planet. Everyone!"

"Everyone but Vanamon, of course," Alaina said derisively. "Come here," she said. "I want to show you something."

She led him to the back of the cave. A number of neatly-stacked cartons sat there.

"This is our depot," she explained. "These are parcels on the way out. Take a look at their tags."



He bent down and examined them. *Destination—Vanamon*, they said.

"Vanamon?" He looked up. "Just what is going on here, Alaina?"

She giggled. "Honestly, Kemar, you—those packages are about to be smuggled *into* Vanamon. They represent the things you need badly, things we've very carefully stolen from other worlds for your benefit. This Guild business works both ways."

"You're smuggling things into Vanamon?" Kemar, feeling suddenly terribly stupid, asked.

"Of course. What else do you think we do with the things we steal? All of you independent planets think you are so accursedly self-sufficient that you won't have anything to do with any of the others!"

"Let me tell him," said one of the two men. "The Guild of Thieves was formed by a group representing a number of different worlds. Our sole purpose is to keep alive interstellar culture during this present period of isolation. By constantly stealing—for you won't permit anything off-planet legally — from one world, and passing along to the next, we've managed to

keep galactic society more or less held together despite itself. There's no great cultural lag between planets, thanks to us, as there might so easily be without us."

"I'm beginning to see," said Kemar uneasily. "But *why*? For what reason?"

"We're not the only star-cluster in the universe," the thief said. "There are other galaxies, probably other peoples — perhaps hostile ones, millions of light-years away. One of these days they're going to get here."

"And our galaxy's going to have to be ready for them," Kemar said suddenly. "*United*."

Alaina smiled. "Now you see it! The trend started by your planet and a whole host of others was toward isolation, toward specialization. The galaxy was beginning to break down into a myriad of individual worlds, each one not knowing or caring what was happening on the other worlds — worse, hating the other worlds."

Kemar nodded. "And the Guild of Thieves is holding things together. You rob Peter, pay Paul, and maintain common ground between the worlds."

He sat down heavily on the packing-case, and studied the

Crime Corps emblem on his sleeve.

He stood up. "But I can't do it. Steal for you, that is. I'm too deeply steeped in Vanamese culture. I could never bring myself—I mean—I just could not—"

"We know that, darling. A man's lifetime beliefs can't be changed that easily. But we don't want you to steal. We have enough agents for that. And," Alaina said, "I'm afraid most of them are a good deal cleverer than you. Not quite as righteous unto themselves, perhaps, but cleverer."

"No, dear," she went on. "We want to put you in on the *distributing* end. Someone has to get outworld property into Vanamon. We have to make sure your planet gets its share of the Galaxy's knowledge and goods."

"Even so," he said stolidly, "it's stolen goods."

She shook her head. "Not most of it. There are a good many planets we don't have to steal from. They are perfectly willing to pay for what they get. They give freely of what they know and receive goods and information back in kind. You won't be handling anything that could be called dishonestly obtained. It has all been paid for, in one way or another. All we want

to do is pay Vanamon in the same way. All we're really doing is forcing trade—do you see that?"

"Does the same thing apply to the inhuman cultures?"

"Certainly," she said. "Rroo and the others act as contacts for other races which inhabit hotter planets than those we consider normal. The Peldians have a body temperature of around forty degrees Fahrenheit, so they are contacts for the colder planets. Every intelligent race in the Galaxy is in on this. We all need each other if any of us are to really progress."

"Distribution only. All right; I think we can swing that," he said softly, thinking how amazed Danrik was going to be one day. "Meanwhile—what are you going to do, Alaina? Back to Vanamon for more—more—"

"More thievery? No," she said. "I'm going to help you on the distribution end."

"You've really given me a problem. How the devil can I get you back to Vanamon now, after I've gone to all this trouble to prove you're a thief?"

She matched his smile. "I'm not worried, Kemar. You will figure it out somehow. It's *your* turn to do something clever."

THE END



DOUBLE STAR. *By Robert A. Heinlein. 186 pp. Doubleday. \$2.95*

Lorenzo Smythe, unemployed actor of the Twenty—? Century, is hired to impersonate one of the Solar System's most influential politicians, John J. Bonforte. Bonforte, it seems, has been kidnapped by the Opposition, and is being held until the implied insult of his absence will cause the Martians to rise in revolt against the Terrans.

By becoming Bonforte for the time being, Lorenzo averts the disaster. But even after the statesman is found, the actor must carry on the deception, becoming more and more entangled in a cause whose aims he does not know, and for reasons which he does not believe. There are persuasive people on his side, true—just as there are evil, selfish men on the other—but it is only when Lorenzo immerses himself so deeply in his characterization that he *becomes* Bonforte that he begins to feel deeply the responsibility he has undertaken.

More than in any other book by Heinlein, here is an exploration of a man's character. Needless to say, it is also a study in excitement and suspense. But it is in this latter category that it fails. For fully nine-tenths of the novel, we await the deadly blow which is sure to fall, the appearance of that cold and sanguine enemy who is sure to collapse the laboriously erected house of cards. But the menace never truly materializes, and by the time we finish, we do so with a faint, disturbing sense of having been cheated by a book which is not one of Heinlein's best.

**PREFERRED RISK.** *By Edson McCann. 248 pp. Simon & Schuster.*  
\$2.75

Edson McCann  
(A canny man)  
Can follow a formula  
As no one else can . . .  
"To copy 'Gravy Planet' 's wise,"  
He said, "I think I'll try it on for size."  
So he dashed off parallels neat and brisk  
And he came up with—a "Preferred Risk."  
Where GP's hero  
Was an agency star  
The same—in insurance—  
Is true of PR;  
And in both, the heroine  
Is to be found  
In the forefront of  
The Underground . . .  
Though I'd never use words like "plagiarize"  
To describe this idea that won a prize,  
My reaction, expressed in a single word—  
Uh-uh.  
This risk is *not* Preferred.

**ALTERNATING CURRENTS.** *By Frederik Pohl. 154 pp. Ballantine.*  
Cloth: \$2; Paper: 35¢

Like Heinlein, Pohl is a careful and indefatigable worker: he believes in creating a careful background, a three-dimensional milieu, before he sets a word down on paper. As the ten stories in this volume demonstrate, such pains are worth taking.

I especially liked a heretofore unpublished story, "Happy Birthday, Dear Jesus," for it aptly demonstrates Mr. Pohl's special gifts. Here is irony paradoxically compassionate and devastating—a perfectly logical and horrific extrapolation from present-day trends. In the future, the author indicates, the code of ethics may well be that of the TV commercial, while our moral tone will be orchestrated to the department store merchandising men's rataplan.

In "Let The Ants Try" a post-World War III time travel story, the author shows what can happen to a common motif in science fiction when it gets in the hands of a man who can

enhance his wit with saturninity. And heaven help all advertising men (they need the help) when Frederik gets to work on 'em. For instance—"What To Do Until The Analyst Comes."

Today, one's taste becomes sated with the steady diet of sweet pap being fed us by the popular magazines. Thus, a tart and oft-times bitter brew can restore the appetite, so to speak. And Mr. Pohl, be it noted, is a fine brewmaster.

**THE CITY AND THE STARS.** *By Arthur C. Clarke. 310 pp. Harcourt, Brace. \$3.75*

Although "The City and The Stars" is based on one of Mr. Clarke's earlier and shorter novels, "Against the Fall Of Night," it has been expanded with such lucidity and invention that even readers of the earlier work can find much to enjoy in this book. However, much of the humanity and warmth which have made Mr. Clarke's other books so appealing seem to be lacking in this one.

A million years in the future, a dying Earth has but one city left, the gigantic, enclosed megalopolis Diaspar. Its inhabitants are so content with the city's all-encompassing service that the thought of pitting themselves against open-air and running water, against darkness and green grass is too horrible for them to contemplate . . . except for one man. He is Alvin, looked upon by many as a mysterious atavism. When Alvin sets out to discover why man has retreated to Earth, he finds other human beings living on the ancient planet. By his examination of the philosophy of life peculiar to each of the civilizations he encounters, Alvin discovers why it was that Man left the stars after his gigantic voyaging.

**CITIZEN IN SPACE.** *By Robert Sheckley. 200 pp. Ballantine. Cloth: \$2; Paper: 35¢*

Once again Robert Sheckley demonstrates in this collection's twelve stories the unique and individual talent which is effervescently his. His stories possess a grave, ludicrous dignity; his people and the situations in which they are embroiled lead to that disease unfortunately rare among S-F fans, a severe case of aching ribs.

In such stories as "The Accountant," written with cheek-pouched tongue, we find ourselves believing nay, finding eminently credible, a world in which sorcery is so commonplace,

and witchcraft so couth, that it is the boy who loves mathematics who is deemed insane.

In "Hunting Problem," the author does another quick "Reverse, harch!" with the result that we chuckle over the problems of an extra-terrestrial Boy Scout who has to bring the skin of a strange beast before he can earn his merit badge.

It is perhaps Mr. Sheckley's greatest gift that he can make us believe absurdities; that he can take old and well-worn themes and invest them with a new japery and conviction.

If, like me, you are a Sheckley addict, you should find this newest release a welcome addition to your s-f shelves.

THE DRAGON IN THE SEA. *By Frank Herbert. 192 pp. Doubleday & Co., \$2.95*

Here's a rip-roaring tale of s-f adventure which will make the nape hairs stand with excitement, and the fingernails grow shorter with suspense.

In the 21st Century, years of war have driven all traffic from the land, the air, and the surface of the sea. Only beneath the blue depths can Man survive—and only there can he search for the great deposits of oil without which his struggle cannot continue.

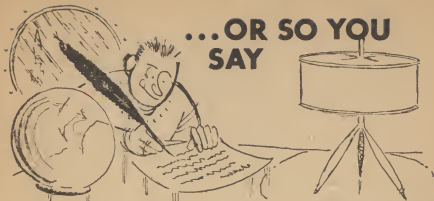
Ensign Johnny Ramsey, electronics officer to the *Fenian Ram*, an undersea tug, goes off with his ship to search for, capture, and bring back an immensely valuable deposit of oil behind the enemy naval lines. Soon the enemy is on the trail—doggedly searching with every device known to his science for the *Fenian Ram*, whose vital cargo may shift the war's balance.

Aboard the sub tug, however, a grim game is in progress, for the crew of the *Fenian Ram* realizes that one among them is a saboteur and spy. But which? As the author skillfully weaves a web of incriminating evidence about each member of the crew, we become enmeshed in the perplexing and fascinating puzzle which means life or death to Johnny and his shipmates.

Naturally, I don't intend to give the secret away. But I am going to recommend heartily this exercise in high adventure.



## ...OR SO YOU SAY



BY THE READERS

Dear Mr. Browne:

Finished the May issue of AMAZING. She's right in front place. All of the stories were good as far as they go. More deep space drama for my liking—but you can't please all of us.

The conclusion of "The Scarlet Saint" was marvelous. Hope to see another serial in the near future.

The readers page, "Or So You Say" was very interesting as always. What would we do if the human couldn't let off steam? Human nature, oh!

The cover was well done in portraying the main story. Keep it up.

W. C. Brandt

Apt—N.

1725 Seminary Ave.

Oakland 21, Calif.

• *Of course, Mr. Brandt—as you say—we can't please everybody. But we sure try our darnedest!—ED.*

Dear Mr. Browne:

Congratulations !!. Gee, that was just great, wonderful, spectacular and all that sort of thing. Why I mean the Anniversary Issue that came out this month, but say do we have to wait another thirty years for an anniversary so we can get another magazine big enough to find anything only the front and back cover on. No. I'm only joking about golly it's awful for some of us old die-hards to get used to these new

type pocket size magazines. When I was at the local drug store, yes, to pick up my AMAZING magazine, I saw a bunch of the kids standing reading comic books. I asked them why they didn't buy them. To which my brilliant friend answered, "Well, gee, there ain't ten cents worth of reading in 'em, and for so little they ain't worth packing home." I was much tempted to say move over bud, while I read my science-fiction magazine, as there "ain't" nothing in it either. No, I'm only joking as AMAZING is the best science-fiction magazine I have been able to find, but as I say I sure would like to get some more stories between the back and front cover. Speaking of the cover, that is one thing I like about the new type that I didn't like about the pulp ones. Yes, I mean the women. Thanks again.

Speaking of women, don't any of them read this magazine any more, or after they got the cover question settled did they give it back to the men? Or do they just sign their initials to their letters?

Lethalu Ray  
120 South Regent St.  
Burlington, Wash.

• *Why didn't you yield to the temptation and actually say it, Lethalu? We science-fiction addicts have a solemn duty to convert the unbelievers. Don't let such an opportunity get away from you again.*—ED.

Dear Editor:

I certainly did enjoy the Anniversary Issue of AMAZING. The fiction must have brought a light into the eyes of many an old reader of s-f. I, myself, was brought up on the science fiction of the "fifties." The stuff that is derided by the old-timers as decadent writing was my basic diet, although they've got to admit that a heck of a lot of it is good.

Getting to the point, that which is lacking in modern s-f was to be found in "The World Beyond," "The Jameson Satellite," and "The Eternal Wall." These stories had that old "sense of wonder" that seems to be missing today. I think that in this day and age it is good to stand in awe of *something!*

At first I was dubious of "The Scarlet Saint," but then I



was caught by the flow of staggering ideas that the author presented. I had never met such a superman as the Saint in modern s-f. Author Banister is to be congratulated on a novel that could be enjoyed and yet thought about, if the latter not as much. Are there any more serials in the offing? I enjoy them greatly.

If Paul Fairman is writing your editorials at least let him confine them to the goings on in the field in relation to the magazine itself. And when you write them do the same. If Ray Palmer does nothing else, he writes a damn good editorial. He makes them a personal thing, an aside to each reader.

Glad to see you every month.

Alan Cheuse  
154 Lewis St.  
Perth Amboy, N. J.

• *There will be controversy pro and con for a long time on the Anniversary Issue—which stories were left out that should have been included—the ones we used that should have been dropped to make way for better ones—stuff like that. But one thing is sure. Those old yarns were great! Possibly nostalgia has added to their value in the case of many readers. Who can say with complete authority? Another thing is almost sure. There will be other issues of the Anniversary type in the future.—ED.*

Dear Mr. Browne:

The reason for this letter is the comment by Allen C. Miller of Phoenix in the May issue. It just goes to show that it takes all kinds of people to run a world. Mr. Miller doesn't like a letter column in a science-fiction magazine, and yet he apparently reads it and even contributes to it. Now, if every science-fiction fan were to write just one letter expressing their personal views as did Mr. Miller, and mail it to AMAZING, there would be enough letters on hand to fill the letter columns of AMAZING for a good many years. It is the very personal opinions of people like you, Mr. Miller, that make the letter columns so intriguing. Why attempt to deny others the freedom of self-expression you yourself indulged in? Accept it as a wonderful part of our Western way of life.

I personally, though an avid science-fiction fan, would be

happy to see twenty or twenty-five pages devoted to nothing but letters from people like you and I, because what they say is very often interesting and informative. The letter columns and organized fandom are what make science fiction so unique and outstandingly democratic in a world in which democracy is being threatened on all sides. Long live science fiction, its freedom of thought and expression, and its very wonderful fans.

And to Mr. Browne I would like to say congratulations on a very nice all-round publication. AMAZING is the most attractive magazine on the stands and consistently features interesting, readable stories.

Larry G. Slapak  
4080 W. 10th Ave.  
Vancouver 8, B.C.

• *We don't think Mr. Miller, in expressing his dislike for letter columns was implying that he favored curtailing anyone's right of free speech or any phase of that right. As we see it, Mr. Miller was just plain airing a pet peeve even as you and all the rest of us would do if the spirit moved us. We don't think he was protesting anyone's right to pen letters any more than you—upon disliking an illustration and griping about it would be demanding that the illustrator turn his back on art and starve to death.—ED.*

Dear Mr. Browne:

This is the first time I've ever written to your magazine, but I just had to get this off my chest. I've been hearing people say in your letter column that they dislike serials. If they'd only stop to think a minute they'd retract their statement. After all, what is a serial? It's a book-length novel which is printed in a science-fiction magazine in three or four parts before publication in hardcover form. So by printing a serial the magazine is saving the readers money which they would ordinarily spend buying the book. Now, as you can see that a reader by saying that he dislikes serials, is really saying I like to waste money.

Now that I've gotten that off my chest I'll review the May issue. Best story in the issue (excluding "The Scarlet Saint") was "Uncle Kim" for its surprise ending. The next best was

a tie between "A Trip to Anywhen" and "Of Men and Bugs." Oh, yes, when are we getting another Johnny Mayhem adventure. This time make it a novel. One thing I've noticed some magazines do is to give a word count of the stories for their readers, I'm sure it would not be too much trouble to do so in your magazines. Also how about a photo cover on the back page, such as an astronomical photo. I think that it would be very nice. To end it off I would like to know where I can get back issues of your magazine. My favorite magazines are yours and IMAGINATION. Keep AMAZING up there with it. How about a story from Sheekley, I like his endings.

Walter Shamest  
850 Bryant Ave.  
Bronx 59, N. Y.

• *The lead novelette in this issue is a Johnny Mayhem adventure. How's that for filling a request promptly, Mr. Shamest?—ED.*

Dear Mr. Browne:

Well, to say the least, I'm greatly disappointed in a number of things. First complaint I have is this: How come the digest size? What happened to the good old pulps with the untrimmed edges? And speaking of the digest and pulp sizes, how come the decrease in pages from the number that were in the pulps and how come the increase in the price? For twenty-five cents way back in '51 you could get a copy of AMAZING STORIES with 165 pages; now, for thirty-five cents you get 130 pages, and, another gripe of mine, less printed words per page than the pulps.

Did you *have* to follow the other magazines, science-fiction magazines, when they went digest? Why didn't you stick to pulp size?

And the covers in '51 were much, much, much better than what appear on your magazine now. Even the stories were of a better grade, I think.

Don't get me wrong! I love AMAZING like a brother! I buy every issue, and copy, I can get my hands on; and I'll keep on buying AMAZING until I die, or go broke.

But I think, and maybe some of your other fans will agree

with me, that if you went back to pulps in size, and general format, you'd get better placement on the newsstands, and attract a lot more people.

As far as I know, there are only two science-fiction pulps on the stands today, and they don't even measure up to par in my estimation.

I don't have to tell you that I am waiting for a "back-to-pulp-size" craze, and I think it will come about very shortly. So why don't you, and that great FANTASTIC, lead the rest of them to the pulps?

And, if I may, I would like to say a few words about FANTASTIC. I would like to see that magazine go back to printing fantasy stories, horror stories, etc. There isn't a magazine on the market these days with that particular theme. And, that way, you'd have a science-fiction magazine and a real fantasy book.

I've only got one more thing to say right now: I want to buy back issues of AMAZING STORIES. Not the digest size, but rather the pulp size. If any of you readers out there have any old AMAZING STORIES and want to sell them to me, I wish that you would write me and tell me the date and the volume and the number as well as how much you want for them. One other thing, the older the issue the more I will gladly pay. But all issues must have covers on them, Okay?

Ron Haydock  
4212 Oak Ave.  
Brookfield, Illinois.

• *First, Ron, as to the so-called digest size. The term "digest" is really a misnomer, erroneously named because the true digest magazines were the first to use that format. It is becoming more apparent every day that the compact format is here to stay as the format of modern fiction publishing.*  
—ED.

Dear Editors:

This is getting to be somewhat of a habit, but here's my monthly offering for what it's worth. It is your own fault, really, for after reading s-f for lo these many years I finally write to the editor—and find my first offering appearing on the pages of AMAZING two issues later! Now I write not to

seek print but to give my opinions and suggestions knowing that these fan letters *are* read and not banished unopened to file 13.

The May cover by Valigursky was very well done and illustrated the lead story, but haven't I seen the design before someplace—many times before, in fact. (Got to find something to gripe about; can't have you resting on your oars and thinking that nothing can be improved upon.) Milt Lesser's lead story and the serial conclusion were the best in the book, and Jorgensen's (PWF?) short also very good. Judging from your letter column, however, I'll have disagreement on two of the above from Don Legere, as they violate point one and six of his taboos.

Best illo in this month's issue is also for the lead story the one that Finlay didn't sign or his signature was cut from, but there's no mistaking the painstaking detail of the illustration. Also the small illos on pages 46 and 86 were very well done and in the style of that other great pen and ink man Lawrence. The balance were also okay, but who is Cin or Lin as the case may be? Would like to see you give the artists more credit, either by placing their names below their illo or by listing the artists each issue on the contents page. Also, now that PWF is a "regular" around the place, don't you think that his name should be on the contents page also?

Also in this issue not a word was mentioned about next month's serial. Where is the good old science-fiction blurb to get the readers all hot for the next issue; or wasn't there enough funds in the exchequer to obtain another book-length offering? Don't stop now, you're going great!

Hope that the sales figures on the April Anniversary Issue were good enough to induce you to make it an annual event. You surely had a nice package in this year's issue!

This concludes the monthly offering of grins and grimaces, but I'll be back—got the habit, you know!

Herbert E. Beach  
210 West Paquin  
Waterville, Minn.

• *It warms our heart when someone writes in praising our illustrations because an illustrator's life is a tough one. They*

*work so hard and get so little attention. Yet their work is almost as vital as that of the fiction writer. After all wouldn't stories be pretty lonely in any magazine without the happy companionship of a good illustration?—ED.*

Dear Mr. Browne:

Well, my algebra homework is done and my evening studying is finished. I've read all the current issues of almost all the s-f magazines and there isn't a decent T.V. program so I guess I'll write a letter to ye 'ole editor.

Wow! What an issue! The best issue since the May 1955 one. Every single story was well-written, well-plotted and every story kept me intensely interested. Honestly, I couldn't put the magazine down.

The best story was Milt Lesser's "The Girl Who Hated Air." You know, I think Milt is my favorite writer now. This was a fine story, possibly the best in AMAZING for 1956, so far.

The last part of "The Scarlet Saint" was the best of the other three parts. Those last couple of pages were the best part of the whole serial. What a "sense of wonder" I had after I finished the novel.

My third favorite is "A Trip to Anywhen," by Ivar Jorgensen. Incidentally, Jorgensen is another of my favorites. This story would have been my second favorite but it was overshadowed by "The Scarlet Saint."

This Edmond Warren is sure a good writer. Betcha he's a pseudonym for some big name writer.

Valigursky is a good artist and he is one of the best in the field, but don't you think you could have a cover by someone else for a change? Oh, yes, the May cover by Val was excellent. It was slightly reminiscent of pulp days.

Keep up the current standard all year, and AMAZING will, once again, be my favorite magazine.

Marty Fleischman  
1247 Grant Avenue  
Bronx 56, New York

• *That phrase of yours "sense of wonder" is one we've been using for a long time. No other term so well describes the magic of Burroughs, Talbott Mundy, H. DeVere Stacpools*

and all the other giants of adventure fiction. These writers were great because they had the ability to not only create glamorous worlds but to transmit to the reader a sense of association with these worlds and a thrilling illusion that they were indeed real. We are sure "The Scarlet Saint" put Mr. Banister in that class. Watch for his future work.—ED.

Dear Mr. Browne:

This may be a little late to congratulate you on your 30th Anniversary Issue, but congratulations. It was one of the best issues ever. You should have a 30th anniversary more often.

Now to the May issue. It was pretty good, but "The Scarlet Saint" kind of let me down at the end.

I agree with Don Legere up to a certain point, and that point is where he says Bradbury can't write. In my opinion Bradbury is the best s-f writer around. So there!

One other thing. To the readers: I have some books and magazines to sell or trade. If interested send dime for catalogue (refunded with first order).

Ted Bliss  
1727 Schiller Ave.  
Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio

• *Congratulations on the 30th Anniversary Issue keep pouring in. But we hope they continue because we'll never get enough of them.*—ED.

Dear Mr. Browne:

It is only fair to write you a few words to say that at least one reader thinks you rang the bell with the 30th Anniversary Issue. There were several stories I hadn't read before, and I haven't missed many since the 20's. In your first paragraph, surely you were over-modest in not including a sixth reason for purchasing this special issue. The name AMAZING STORIES on the cover will sell the magazine to the reader who knows his s-f if the rest of the cover is blank.

I found it extremely strange that in not one of the prophecies for the year 2001 A.D. was the possibility considered that a completely new branch of science might be developed which would change the whole shape of things. For

example, what would the world be like if some method of controlling gravity were to be found? You guess.

Do you remember the story written in 1875 about the world of 1950? There were steam-powered aircraft and a telegraph set in every home. He didn't have the imagination to foresee the development of the internal combustion engine or electricity and its offspring, electronics. And at the end he said, in effect, "Of course this is not to be taken seriously, because people would spend all their time standing around in wonder at these marvels."

AMAZING STORIES is one of the few magazines that has always made a clear distinction between science fiction and fantasy. You have published fantasy but have never called it s-f. Also you have pretty well steered clear of horse opera disguised as s-f.

Enough of flattery; can you answer a question? How many readers of s-f do you suppose there are among us? The percentage must be very small. I think there are mighty few of us who are really curious to know whither we are going and how. From my experience the average person can't make a clear distinction between Jupiter and Alpha Centauri, and furthermore he doesn't care to know.

F. W. Zwicky  
2244 S. 6th St.  
Rockford, Ill.

● *It's impossible to say how many science-fiction fans there are, mainly because it's so difficult to really define one. Certainly every living person is aware of our modern scientific miracles and vitally interested in what the future holds in the way of atomic destruction or peaceful advancement. Of course the so-called "fandom" fan who reads science fiction as we define it, is a small segment of world population, but their numbers are growing all the time.—ED.*



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And this producer out in Hollywood had read some of his fiction and thought he might be successful in doing screenplays. So this producer offered him a two-month contract at quite a large salary and—well—Mr. Browne (who really doesn't care much for money) decided to try it. And—and there you are.

*Q: All I can say, it certainly shows the true character of the man. He shouldn't be allowed to attend the science-fiction convention this year.*

*A: I know, sir. He certainly deserves little consideration. But if somebody would point out the error of his ways, he might reform.*

*Q: I doubt it. When a man gets that depraved . . . Well, let it go. Now, I see by the ad on page three that Grandon Publishing Company is bringing out Browne's novel, The Return of Tharn. As I remember, that was a fairly good yarn.*

*A: Oh, yes, sir. Very—ah—readable. A great many fans were kind enough to refer to it as a real classic—that and the first of the series, Warrior of the Dawn.*

*Q: I'd hardly call either of them a classic.*

*A: Oh, I agree with you. They were . . . shall we say . . . adequate. But for the reader who likes the Edgar Rice Burroughs' novels, they're passable. Or so it seems to me.*

*Q: What I can't fathom is how a man who writes novels on that order could write—well, could write Westerns—there, I've said it!*

*A: I know. But of course, sir, you must remember he's a writer—and I don't have to tell you how—how unpredictable writers are.*

*Q: That's true. Well, perhaps I'll mail in the coupon and order both the books. Autographed copies have a habit of increasing in value—and besides I believe in supporting the science-fiction and fantasy book field.*

*A: Very commendable, sir. And perhaps if the books bring in enough money in royalties to him, he won't be tempted to go around writing these—these stories about—ugh—cowboys and Indians.*

*Q: An excellent point. Get the word to all fandom.*

PWF.

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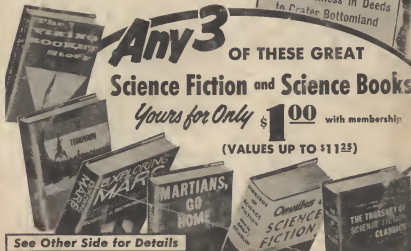
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